

ABSTRACT

THE PASTORS' STUDY GROUP: RESEARCH INTO THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF PASTORS PARTICIPATING IN PASTORS' STUDY GROUPS

by

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This project examined spiritual formation in the lives and ministry of six pastors as a result of their participation in a pastors' study group. Based on a review of related literature and the research results of two self-surveys, two surveys of each pastor's congregational leadership, and interviews of each of the pastors, the study compared a particular pastor's perceived spiritual growth over a period of six months during which the pastor participated in a pastors' study group.

Major findings included the following: (1) Pastors' study groups are most likely to be effective when groups are self-selected; (2) the curricula/agenda of these study groups is not as important as the pastors participating; (3) six months of monthly meetings do not offer enough time to create measurable spiritual formation; (4) ministry is a struggle for pastors and their families; and, (5) balance among family, life, and ministry is the goal for faithful pastors.

While this study was conducted of one denomination in one region of the United States, I believe the conclusions of this research may have application to multiple ministry settings.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

THE PASTORS' STUDY GROUP:

RESEARCH INTO THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF PASTORS

PARTICIPATING IN PASTORS' STUDY GROUPS

presented by

Christopher Robert Pulliam

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THE PASTORS' STUDY GROUP:
RESEARCH INTO THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF PASTORS
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A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of
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Doctor of Ministry

by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
CHAPTER 1	
PROBLEM.....	1
The Problem.....	2
Purpose.....	9
Research Questions	10
Research Question #1	10
Research Question #2	10
Research Question #3	11
Research Question #4	11
Definition of Terms.....	11
Ministry Intervention	11
Context.....	12
Continuing Education and Competence.....	14
Methodology	15
Participants.....	15
Variables	16
Instrumentation	17
Data Collection	17

Delimitations and Generalizability	18
Overview of the Study	18
CHAPTER 2	
LITERATURE	19
Pastor as Person	20
Pastor as Pastor	23
Pastor as Preacher	27
Pastor as Leader	29
Expectations	31
Control	31
Passion	34
Importance of Preaching	35
Pastor as Theologian	36
Dissertations and Leading Pastors	40
CHAPTER 3	
METHODOLOGY	46
Research Questions	47
Research Question #1	47
Research Question #2	48
Research Question #3	48
Research Question #4	49
Participants	49
Instrumentation	50

Validity and Reliability	52
Data Collection	53
Independent and Dependent Variables	54
Control	55
Data Analysis	55
Ethical Procedures	55
CHAPTER 4	
FINDINGS	57
Statistical Analysis.....	61
Research Question #1	61
Research Question #2	66
Research Question #3	71
Research Question #4	73
Summary of Major Findings.....	77
CHAPTER 5	
DISCUSSION	78
Summary	78
Major Findings.....	80
Major Finding #1	80
Major Finding #2	82
Major Finding #3	87
Major Finding #4	89
Major Finding #5	92

Implications of Findings	92
Limitations of the Study.....	94
Serendipitous Observations	96
Recommendations.....	97
Future Studies	98
Final Thoughts	100
APPENDIXES	
A. Pre- and Posttest Pastor Survey	102
B. Posttest Interview Questions	104
C. Pre- and Posttest Leader Survey.....	105
D. Verbatims	107
E. Mid-Test Paragraphs	124
WORKS CITED	127

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 4.1. Lay Leadership Survey Participation.....	64

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 4.1. Pastors' survey scores on non-reverse questions.....	62
Figure 4.2. Pastors' (R) survey scores on reverse questions.....	63
Figure 4.3. Lay leadership's survey scores on non-reverse questions	63
Figure 4.4. Lay leadership's (R) survey scores of reverse questions.....	64

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May God Bless,

Dr. Chris Pulliam

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Unity is the essence of the Christian community. Scripture offers over thirty “one another” phrases—love one another, forgive one another, pray for, serve, encourage, build, and listen to one another to bolster Christian unity. When unity is a primary focus within the Christian community, believers benefit from, build on, and extend one another’s faith.

Similarly, knowledge is the essence of the research community. Within the research community, researchers benefit from, build on, and extend one another’s work. The result is a greater understanding of the world than anyone could have gained individually. The relationship between Christians and research communities has a troubled history. Religion and science have existed more as competitors than as colleagues, each perspective offering the truth—but from a different base. Still today, religion and science struggle to coexist. In some circles, the relationship flows beautifully while in other circles the two are ideologically opposed. A marriage of Christian and research communities brings about learning for both.

Customer service is the essence of the business community, yet I define “service” within the context of competition and profit-making—different than “service” as sacrificial love as it is defined in the Christian community. The relationship between the Christian and business communities has been troubled as well. Especially within the past twenty years with the onset of the megachurch, business and Christian communities have drawn closer and closer together for better and for worse (for better in terms of some best

practices brought forth in the areas of management and leadership; for worse in terms of the general shift of focus in many ministries from faithfulness to effectiveness).

In this project, I bring these three communities together to shape a new understanding of pastors' callings in faith and ministry. In bringing these three communities together, do not assume I am giving each an equal portion of weight and influence. My allegiance is to Christ and the way of Christ, which I consider to be the highest calling and the focus of my ministry life. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit is alive and well in every arena of life particularly amidst the work and service of Christian people. God is at work in each of these communities (Christian, research, and business) and is seeking to draw all of Creation to him. Believers can gain new insight into life and ministry by studying the best practices of the business community. Together within the Christian community, Christians seek a greater understanding of how to be effective at being faithful.

The Problem

People who serve in ministry today are faced with a dizzying array of options, opportunities, and expectations. Many pastors get lost in the midst of opportunity turned chaos. Evidence of these wandering pastors comes from the alarming rate of attrition among clergy. Pastors who are unable to focus their ministries and successfully juggle all the expectations, become exhausted. Further evidence of these wandering pastors shows up in the incredible decrease in numbers of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) over the past thirty five years from 1.5 million members in 1970 to around 700,000 today (*Yearbook* 584). Many factors combine to create the rapid decline in membership, but clearly faithful pastorates have been the exception over the past thirty-five years. I use the

word *faithful* not in the sense of carrying on the traditions of Scripture and the church, but faithful in asking the hard questions and pursuing the answers among the prayerful leadership of the church.

Survival for pastors is not addressed fully by any one element of self-care; however, I believe pastors can survive their ministries and even thrive by organizing their time to include participation in a pastors' study group. Each pastoral setting is unique, yet commonalities exist across denominational, demographic, and geographic lines. Certainly all who are called to the ministry of Jesus Christ want to serve and use their time in the most effective way possible to reach the greatest number of people for Christ and to help persons become all God created them to be. Faithfulness is not limited to any one pastoral type or congregation. All pastors have their own styles, passions, and gifts; the same is true of their congregations. Therefore, what works and is considered faithful in one setting or with one pastor may or may not be so in another congregation or with another pastor. Still, pastors search for those elements of ministry that are constant and applicable in all settings. I want to measure the effects pastors' participation in a pastors' study group has on their spiritual growth.

A decade ago, I was stirred (heart, soul, mind, and strength) by Paul's words in Romans 12:2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (NIV). The word "transformed" is what stood out. I want to be transformed; Christ transforms me through his grace and mercy—his life, death, and resurrection. Today, Christians are transformed within the Christian community (Christ's Church in the largest sense), as believers love, serve, teach, listen, forgive, and pray for one another. James W. Sire, in his book, begins a similar quest,

quoting Luke 10:27a, “Love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all our strength and with all your mind,” encouraging Christians to pursue God with their intellect (9) where the contributions of the research community come to bear.

From the business community, I read Stephen R. Covey’s book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, when it first came out in 1989. The seventh habit he promoted was the habit of “sharpening the saw” (288). Covey explains that too many people get so busy with their lives, working constantly that they fail to stop and sharpen their saws—neglecting to improve their overall life skills of knowledge, relationships, health, or faith. I continue to use the phrase “sharpen the saw” to describe anything in my life that can generally improve my life skills and/or ministry. In Covey’s preceding chapter, he describes *synergy*;

What is synergy? Simply defined, it means that the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It means that the relationship which the parts have to each other is a part in and of itself. It is not only a part, but the most catalytic, the most empowering, the most unifying, and the most exciting part. (262-63)

Synergy is the result of cooperative and trusting individuals working together to create something greater than any one of them could have created alone.

This research is focused on six pastors in five separate Disciples of Christ congregations in order to understand best the relationship between their spiritual growth and the pastors’ study group. In carrying out this research, I hoped to do something to help the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Church universal.

Ten years into my first ministry as senior pastor, I was far from burned out. I could see the trajectory my ministry was taking. I was not on track to become all God created me to be. Taking part in Asbury’s Doctor of Ministry program encouraged

studying, learning, and group dialogue once again. I knew my participation in Asbury Theological Seminary and my formal schooling would not and could not last forever, and my long-term approach to ministry would have to change. Fueling my faith and intellect in order to fuel my ministry and messages would be essential for the years ahead. I could think of several ways to address this problem, everything from creating men's ministry to meet my needs to attending church conferences in the hopes of rejuvenating regularly. In the end I decided the best way to fuel my faith for the second half of my life was to set aside time to participate in a pastors' study group. I am not talking about a lectionary study group whose purpose is to discuss upcoming sermons, or fellowship groups for lunch and the latest, but a group of pastors who are seeking to climb higher, go further, "spur one another on" (Heb. 10:24), "press on" (Phil. 3:14), and be more faithful in their ministries. I like how Stanley Hagemeyer stated pastors' predicament in the title of his article, "Your Adventure in Ministry: Receding or Re-Seeding" (167). Out of that investment in and commitment to others can come the fuel for life as a pastor—one who is often called upon to represent God humbly.

After years of wrestling with the focus of this project, I realized I longed to be not only competent in my pastorate but faithful, courageous, and bold as well. I am aware of my many colleagues who are struggling to keep their sanity and their jobs amidst the swirl of expectations and needs. At least currently, I am not in that struggle and am energized to "enlarge my territory" (1 Chron. 4:10). So much has been written about avoiding burnout and handling depression in ministry, yet I wanted to look for a means of going further, joining forces with other emotionally healthy pastors to stretch toward God's vision for their lives and ministries. Still, this project is not about "doing"

anything; it is about “being.” I aimed to create an experience not an agenda of things to do or complete. For many pastors, their problems lie in their inability to “be” instead of always “doing” something for someone, thus draining themselves dry because so little is being poured into them.

Justifying my desire to be part of such a group hardly seems necessary; no one has questioned or will question my participation. Nevertheless, because I control my own schedule, I wanted to research for myself the ongoing value of my participation in a pastors’ study group in light of the myriad of other important elements of ministry. Some will say this practice is self-serving; I see this group as part of a larger effort to fulfill God’s calling upon my life.

One could argue that study does not have to happen according to a rigid schedule. While this rigid schedule may not be a necessity for all pastors, my own experience has shown me I need to schedule time for this group as I do for everything else. Without intentionally adding regular study time in my schedule, I have found myself drying out spiritually. To approach reading, prayer, and peer dialogue as something I will do when I have time is a recipe for failure. An occasional book and/or conference do not in any way count as ongoing study or participation in any type of group process. Pastors’ schedules easily fill up with ministry tasks if a regular meeting time is not set. Planning far in advance is the key. Since I began my course work for this doctoral degree program, I have had a surprisingly unified chorus of comments from my congregation on the spiritual growth they have witnessed in me during that time. My studies and course participation were not on a rigid schedule, but they were constant for a period of time

over five years and, therefore, allude to the larger truth—pastors need the intellectual and spiritual challenge of other pastors.

Another rigid aspect of a pastors' study group is the course of study. Too much continuing education today is piecemeal transmission of knowledge and skills that, as a consequence, offer too little challenge to students to develop their own resources and to become independent, lifelong inquirers, growing constantly while engaged in ministry. Groups should cover a variety of topics, authors, and theologians while keeping to an overall plan. Seminary professors could be of great assistance here.

Among these ten pastoral functions—presiding at Sunday worship services, counseling, making pastoral calls, teaching, visiting hospitals, praying, preparing sermons, reading/studying, presiding at weekday services, and doing administrative tasks, study ranked eighth in importance, second in enjoyment, and fifth in actual time spent (Smith 47). This ranking shows a desire to study even when study comes up against other important aspects of ministry. An interesting study would look into the personality types of pastors relating to their time spent in study.

Finally, ongoing study could be viewed as the antithesis of a ministry of presence. Pastors already have so many administrative tasks keeping them in the office away from their people. More time now committed to a pastors' study group would only add to that perceived imbalance. The answer to this imbalance is on the administrative side of ministry. Just as the apostles in Acts 6 did not want to neglect their preaching in order to serve the widows, neither do pastors want to neglect their time of study (in this case, collegial sharing) in order to handle the endless details of ministry and endless needs of a congregation. Emergencies will always take precedence. Lay leaders or additional staff is

the key component here. A pastor's wisdom in preaching and counseling apart from God is not valuable in itself (Craddock, *Preaching* 38); thus, pastors must tend to the study of God's word (individually and corporately) and the relationships (vertical and horizontal) that come from prayer and study.

Upon being baptized into Christ, each person is given spiritual gifts with which to serve God and further God's kingdom here on earth. Among those gifts are preaching, teaching, leadership, prayer, mercy, knowledge, and discernment. No one has all the gifts, yet all Christians have at least one spiritual gift. Those gifts can change as God sees fit for an individual during different seasons of life. Pastors have different spiritual gifts and employ their gifts weekly, supplementing those gifts with hard work and discipline in their ministries. Others have become great preachers because of their hard work and discipline in study and sermon preparation over the years, and God has given them the gift of preaching through persistence. Some have gained knowledge or learned to pray more faithfully. Therefore, whether I have the gift of preaching or not, I, too, can become a more faithful preacher who provides consistent, nourishing, spiritual food and leadership for my congregation by disciplining myself, my schedule, and the congregation's expectations in order to participate in a pastors' study group. God will honor the efforts to embody the Word (Incarnation) and perhaps grant (fan into flame) the needed gifts to those who genuinely seek his face. I am not dismissing the Holy Spirit. The benefits of this regular study group will not be limited to better preaching, although most likely congregations will first notice any changes in their pastors as preachers in the pulpit. Pastors will be better equipped in pastoral, teaching, and administrative roles

while growing closer to God and bringing this heightened spiritual maturity to their congregations weekly.

God gives Christians the spiritual gifts they need to carry out God's purpose at particular times. Pastors fall into the trap of thinking the Holy Spirit and hard work are two separate "work horses" pulling in opposite directions—meaning a pastor can either have the Spirit or be well studied. Instead, these are two separate forces that pull together in the same direction (Dongell). Therefore, one element does not exclude the other.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the spiritual growth in six pastors of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in northwest Arkansas, as a result of their participation in a pastors' study group that met for six months to discuss their reading of classic and contemporary theological texts.

I concentrated on eight specific dissertations dealing with subjects similar to this project topic. Samuel John Connell studied the relationship between the way pastors use their time and the size of their congregations. Dan Southerland studied the priorities in ministerial roles of pastors in growing versus plateaued or declining Florida Baptist Churches. Lynn E. Crader measured relationships between the attendance of a congregation and the amount of time in sermon preparation. Michael T. Powers looked at clergy self-care support systems. Reversing pastoral burnout through a program of balanced living was Steven Anton Gerig's focus. Bruce N. Ursin offered a retreat model for preventing burnout among clergy. James Allison Belcher held up silence and solitude as a discipline for individual and corporate spiritual growth. Finally, Tim Eugene Barton

researched the Christian leader as a spirit-driven visionary. Several of these dissertations helped form the basis of this project.

Before this project began, I rarely spent time in broad, theological reading and conversation with colleagues. My study consisted mainly of planning, reading, Bible study, and writing in order to produce the weekly sermon. About once a quarter, a half day was invested to plan the longer term preaching calendar (usually three month increments). I lined up guest speakers, worked in preaching opportunities for the associate pastor, and decided upon the themes of upcoming worship services so those themes could be disseminated to the coordinating staff persons and ministries. My study time was exclusively directed to my preaching. The pastors' study group is decidedly and intentionally not a sermon preparation group but is designed for broader spiritual growth through shared thinking toward more faithful ministry.

Research Questions

Four research questions guided this study.

Research Question #1

According to the survey results, submitted mid-test paragraphs, and posttest interviews, what kind of spiritual growth occurred in the pastors over the six-month period?

Research Question #2

According to the submitted mid-test paragraphs and posttest interviews, what elements of pastors' lives, ministries, and attitudes have kept them from engaging in this form of reading and discussion prior to this experience?

Research Question #3

What are some critical needs in pastors' spiritual growth process best satisfied by pastoral colleagues?

Research Question #4

What is the value of the shared learning in an ongoing reading and discussion group made up of pastoral colleagues?

Definition of Terms

In this study, the key terms are defined as follows. The senior minister or member of the clergy who has primary responsibility for preaching and leading a congregation is referred to as *pastor*. The result of spiritual growth is an increased *spiritual maturity*. A *pastors' study group* is a gathering of clergy numbering three or more. The group decides upon the course of study and meets regularly for discussion and inspiration. *Synergy* means that the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Covey 262-63).

Ministry Intervention

I wanted to gain an understanding of the tangible and intangible value of a pastors' study group, yet the thought that six pastors (already friends and/or acquaintances) would demonstrate measurable/noticeable spiritual growth after reading and discussing five books over six months is naïve. The pastors did not invest enough time together (ninety minutes once a month for discussion; several hours apart to read that month's text) to create spiritual growth as a result of their experience. The value of the research project was the awakening of the pastors to the benefit of ongoing meetings together to discuss theological matters and issues—creating synergy in a variety of aspects in the process. Ultimately, no single element, but a combination of comradery and

peer relationships mixed with the reading and discussion, made this study valuable. Some colleague groups can become overly focused on feelings and emotions to the detriment of the group. Our group maintained a good balance of sincerity and friendship without losing focus on our study. One of the biggest problems in getting together a pastors' study group is in finding the right mix of participants. I was looking for pastors who were emotionally healthy and willing to join a network of colleagues.

I wanted to know if leaders from each of the congregations represented would perceive any spiritual growth in their pastor after we met for six months with the pastors' study group. I wanted to know the same from the pastors themselves.

Context

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a mainline Protestant denomination with roots going back to the Scottish Presbyterians who came to America in search of religious freedom two hundred years ago. A century ago, the Disciples, as participants are known informally, split with the Church of Christ over organ music and/or other issues dating back to the Civil War. All five First Christian Churches of Northwest Arkansas (NWA) began in the late 1800s. Through the years the Christian Church in this region gained a reputation for taking in young pastors and grooming them for service in larger churches. In the beginning I fit that mold, being called to serve there when I was twenty-eight years old. Because Northwest Arkansas is in one of the fastest-growing regions of the country, the church has grown considerably and is no longer seen as a stepping stone to other churches. I served there sixteen years before accepting a call to serve in Texas, having stayed twice as long as any of my predecessors.

Of the pastors who made up the group, four have served in NWA over ten years; two pastors have served there less than five years. The pastors were between the ages of 37 and 47. Each of the pastors' congregations is experiencing moderate growth. Of the six pastors participating, five are senior pastors and one is an associate pastor. Four pastors serve in churches with two or more ordained ministers; the other two are solo pastors. Two pastors have Doctor of Ministry degrees; four have Master's of Divinity degrees. I mention the educational backgrounds of the participating pastors only to point out the level of education and knowledge present in the discussions each month. Pastors serving alongside someone else in ministry sometimes have different needs than pastors serving without other colleagues on site. A decade ago, when several of us were just getting started in ministry and/or NWA, our denominational office called all Disciples pastors together for district meetings. At first the meetings were well attended by pastors and retired pastors (usually fifteen to twenty). However, the meetings slowly dwindled as the non-retired pastors declined the opportunity to facilitate the meetings. Discrepancies of available time and the attitudes of a few pastors (retired and non-retired) drained the life out of the group. The self-selected, peer group used in this project worked due to the fact that I was able to recruit only the five other pastors with whom I wanted to spend time (and who enjoyed one another's company). The underlying attitude here seems selfish at best, yet if busy people are going to invest time in something important but not urgent (Covey 151), value and relational connection must be staples among the group or the group will disintegrate quickly.

At times, relatable colleagues are hard to find, yet pastors understand they cannot survive in ministry. "No one can simply become a Christian by oneself, or worship

wholly by oneself, or be converted by oneself, or preach to oneself, or serve only oneself,” and “no one can function as an effective Spirit driven visionary by oneself” (Barton 55). Retreats featuring prayer and solitude abound, but group settings outside one’s congregation (and even more so, outside one’s denomination) are rare. “One of the most widely held myths about support networks is that they happen by accident” (Ursin 44). Most often these groups are the result of significant relational and organizational work.

Continuing Education and Competence

Regardless of one’s chosen career, continuing education is a necessary part. “Knowledge gained by the time a person is twenty-one is largely obsolete by the time he or she is forty years old” (Roberts, *How Can Continuing Theological Education* 127). While *experience* is a great teacher, faithfulness is the result of experience, obedience, and learning. Nevertheless, faithfulness is not static; persons must strive constantly to remain faithful. Continuing education without direction rarely manifests itself in a net gain over time. The goal of continuing education is wisdom, yet faithfulness is the larger ministry goal. Staying engaged in some form of continuing education is the responsibility of each professional; continuing education is not the job of some outside entity. Pastors’ study groups provide an outlet to mold one’s wisdom into faithfulness, yet these study groups are most often overlooked as unnecessary and/or not worth the time and effort. Many pastors say they want to be involved in a pastors’ study group of some kind but do not have the people skills to start one (Rousch 38).

Two certain limitations lurk within pastors’ study groups: (1) Members who are unwilling to open up to one another on a significant level, and (2) groups that grow

closed to other persons and/or ideas. If either limitation exists within a group, the group will be of little value.

The church is an easy target for criticism and has been criticized for both being too pragmatic and being too other worldly. Some critics complain Christians are shallow, simplistic, and naïve. Others complain Christians' ideas are unintelligible. The crisis of competence shows up in dealing with ethics and issues and the inability to shape others' understanding (Rousch 35). With technological advances all around (some positive, some negative), Christians, and particularly pastors, need to know the issues and be able to speak faithfully into these circumstances.

Spiritual formation is difficult to measure and cannot be easily pinned down to a specific discipline—in this case, a pastors' study group. These thoughts are what have led me to my research problem. I wanted to see how the shared learning created in a pastors' study group related specifically to the quality and faithfulness of their overall ministry.

Methodology

This was an evaluative study in the experimental mode utilizing two separate multiple choice pre- and posttests, interviews with the five pastors, and mid- and posttest question and answer responses from the pastors. The statistical representation of the findings are represented in Chapter 4.

Participants

The participants of this study were leaders from each represented congregation, five local pastors of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in NWA in June, September, and November 2007. Population and sample are identical—six pastors of Disciples Churches in NWA. Leadership groups, one from each congregation, completed

pre- and posttest surveys about their pastors. Pastors completed the same pre- and posttest surveys. The pastors' survey was in its original form, whereas the survey administered to the leadership groups was altered only to make it read in third person. Each pastor participated in a posttest interview to determine qualitative measures. The pastors also turned in mid-test paragraphs commenting on their experiences within the group study.

Variables

The independent variable of this study was pastors' participation in a pastors' study group. The dependent variable was the value of the experience for the pastors. For a period of six months, six pastors read a book each month and met to discuss the reading for ninety minutes on the second Thursday, June through November 2007.

While sermon preparation is the action taken during a preplanned period of time including planning, research, reading, construction, rehearsal, and prayer, ultimately leading to a sermon, the pastors' study group served to broaden the pastors' wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and faith. Early in my ministry, I had been warned not to limit my study time only to sermon preparation. I had fallen victim to that habit only to see the time I was spending in sermon preparation dwindle to six hours per work week. Being part of a study group has a cumulative effect over a lifetime. Time invested today in reading a book or in deep theological discussion will not necessarily appear in the sermon preached the following Sunday. Rather, over time study, reflection with others, and communion with God will build up and transform pastors, thus increasing the depth of and presumably the faithfulness of their ministries.

Instrumentation

This study employed the use of two surveys of congregational leaders, two surveys of the pastors, and an interview with each pastor.

I used the Spiritual Maturity Index as a pre- and posttest measure (see Appendix A). The survey was administered to each pastor on 7 June and 11 November. The pastors in turn administered the survey to a body of church leaders from their separate congregations in the months of June and November/December. Additionally, I personally interviewed each of the pastors in November, using a self-designed set of questions (see Appendix B).

The pretest survey identified the current level of spiritual maturity among the pastors and served as a baseline for the beginning of the study. This information would later be used as a comparison number from which to determine an increase or decrease in spiritual maturity in the participating pastors as the test concluded. Once this marker had been ascertained through the pre-study survey, the independent variable was introduced and the pastors began their reading and meetings for a period of six months as an additional aspect of their full-time service in congregations around the region.

This research project was based on the premise that an investment of time in study along with the regular meeting of colleagues would allow for spiritual growth in pastors and would then allow for more faithful ministries.

Data Collection

A verbatim of each of the five interviews was compiled along with my response to the interview questions. Those interviews are included in Appendix D. Only the

assigned number of each pastor was used to identify those participating in the project to protect their anonymity.

Pastors collected the surveys immediately following their completion. I denied several leaders' requests to take the surveys home with them, therefore requiring each leader to complete the survey on site. The Research Reflection Team tallied the survey information for further review.

Delimitations and Generalizability

Only persons in a leadership role at the pastors' churches were given the survey (four pastors surveyed their board of elders; two pastors surveyed their general board). Pastors also completed pre- and posttest self-surveys. I conducted interviews with the five other pastors.

The focus of this project was the spiritual growth that comes from a pastors' study group. I did not attempt to include the personality types of pastors or the effectiveness of various learning styles that might have served to increase the learning and, therefore, the spiritual growth of the pastor. I made no attempts to measure time spent on the readings.

Overview of the Study

Chapter 2 of this work establishes the biblical and theological context for the proposed project. Chapter 3 presented the research design. Chapter 4 reports the research findings. I conclude with a summary and interpretation of the research findings as well as suggestions for further inquiry in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

Centuries ago, Augustine and Donatus argued over whether or not the preacher's faith and morals ultimately affect the preaching event. The debate centers on the understanding of incarnational preaching. One side holds that when the living Christ indwells preachers, they become mere messengers of God's word. Others contend that the indwelling Christ lifts the person of the preacher, mixing with the preacher's heart, mind, and soul to bring God's word in a personal way (Craddock, *Preaching* 22). Today's research has unearthed the same centuries-old debate. From the beginning, I believed that while secondary to the Spirit, the preacher was and is an inseparable and important element in every sermon. I believe the same can be said for pastors and their ministries.

My research looked into the crux of this debate again. I have researched the relationship between a pastors' study group and the pastors' spiritual formation. To begin an overview of the literature, I have divided my findings into five categories:

1. The pastor as person,
2. The pastor as pastor,
3. The pastor as preacher,
4. The pastor as leader, and
5. The pastor as theologian.

While considerable overlap exists in each of the categories, I have drawn out distinctive elements of each category.

Pastor as Person

Pastor as person is perhaps too broad a category. For the purposes of this study, I have included in the “pastor’s person” the images of pastor in community and as disciple, witness, seeker, prayer warrior, spouse, and parent.

Every year thousands of pastors and church professionals crowd into conferences on church growth. Having purchased volumes of church growth material, one often finds these materials work to some degree. Pastors join the fray and at last become the successful pastors and preachers they had set out to be, but not really (Rowell and Goetz 171). Early in my ministry, I could get a crowd of people. Through new cut-and-paste programs and a never-ending work week, I (and I do mean “I”) could draw a crowd. What I could not seem to do was to sustain the new people, nourish them, or assimilate them into the larger body of Christ. Thus First Christian Church began a slow but steady decline from budding super-church, complete with its super-pastor, to average, mediocre, mainline Protestant church. Now after sixteen years in one setting, I realize some kind of ongoing and peer group study is a necessary ingredient to help me reach the next level of faithfulness in ministry.

The model of independence in ministry is not biblical. Jesus’ model was to surround himself with the fellowship of disciples and call them friends (Ursin 43). Scripture is full of covenant relationships reminding believers of God’s presence and building bridges among persons of faith. In the New Testament, believers are directed to love one another, serve one another, pray for one another—the phrase “one another” appears in over thirty variations. Clearly, Christians are not meant to live (or do ministry) alone.

The witness of pastors is on display every moment of every day. Priority one for pastors is developing their own spiritual life. A second priority, if married, is developing relationships with spouse and children (Connell 18). What the congregation wants to see in their pastor is a person living the faith and living it well. Without struggle, faith would not be genuine; without times of drought, faith would not seem possible. The congregation may say they want to hear of Jesus (not the pastor) in the sermons, “yet the preacher and the preached word are inextricably linked. For better or for worse, how parishioners respond to the word is shaped to some degree by how they respond to the preacher as a person” (Randall 86). The witness of the pastor is to demonstrate how to have faith in the midst of everyday life—shallow conversations, strained relationships, overextended schedules, and budget constraints.

Pastors, churches, or the kingdom overall cannot afford for pastors to lose or have a dip in their capacity to act with integrity or to lose their integrity altogether. “When the pastor is empty or weakened, so is his capacity for acting with integrity” (Randall 131). The media regularly unearths another pastor fallen to temptation. Cynicism, callousness, and compromise are the sins of a prayerless pastor (Rowell and Goetz 108). Without time for study and devotion, a pastor wavers and struggles to survive. P. T. Forsyth explains, “Prayerlessness is the worst sin, because it bespeaks as nothing else does, that root of all sin: ‘For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him’ (Rom. 1:21)” (11). Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches” (John 15:5). Burnout in ministry is commonplace. Steven Anton Gerig points out three stages of burnout: the “honeymoon” stage—enthusiasm and commitment eventually give way and energy wanes; the “fuel shortage” stage—characterized by exhaustion, detachment,

illness, anger; and, the “crisis” stage—marked by pessimism, self-doubt, pity, apathy, obsession with one’s own problems, and disillusionment (17). Burnout is nothing new to the Church as Scripture reveals signs of it in the early Church and even in seasons of Paul’s life and ministry.

On the other side of the spectrum are pastors who want more for their lives and ministries. Paul writes, “I *want to* know Christ” (Phil. 3:10), not because Paul *has to* know Christ, but because he *gets to* know Christ. The shared learning and shared experience within a pastors’ study group is one of the best ways to pursue this higher calling. “Synergy requires enormous personal security and openness and a spirit of adventure” (Covey 264). The dynamics of a group create a whole new experience for all involved, in which all the parts contribute and gain from one another. At the core of pastors’ study groups, no one is trying to build or do anything; rather, participants are allowing the whole that already exists to become manifest:

From time to time, (the) tribe (gathered) in a circle. They just talked and talked and talked, apparently to no purpose. They made no decisions. There was no leader. And everybody could participate. There may have been wise men or wise women who were listened to a bit more—the older ones—but everybody could talk. The meeting went on, until it finally seemed to stop for no reason at all and the group dispersed. Yet after that, everybody seemed to know what to do, because they understood each other so well. Then they could get together in smaller groups and do something or decide things. (Jaworski 109)

The value of the tribe’s gathering was purely relational. Pastors’ study groups have a high relational element to them as well. The quality of communication, and therefore learning and sharing, increases significantly when the participants trust one another. Some groups will try too hard or move too fast in the relational process and will eventually diminish

the groups' effectiveness. When groups have a heavy agenda to do or create something, the relational aspects suffer.

Pastor as Pastor

For the person of the pastor, familiarity works both for and against him or her. If pastors are able to minister with integrity over the years, then congregations gain respect for them. If, however, those same pastors have had numerous run-ins, given an old illustration one too many times, or failed to practice what they preach, familiarity breeds contempt and the next parish is only a phone call away. Of course, parishioners may contribute to pastors' lack of self-scrutiny as they line up following each worship service to compliment (sincerely or otherwise) the message and/or ministry of their pastors (Randall 132).

The pressures of ministry want to squeeze out every ounce of energy and fill up every spare moment pastors have. Faithful pastors fight to withhold time for study and refuse the call of immediacy. Time for reflection is one of the elements of ministry that sets a pastor's work apart from others. Business persons are not called upon to reflect on their work; their chief concern is the bottom line. These persons bring their busyness and business mind-sets with them to worship, and pastors wonder why these parishioners have trouble thinking deeply. Interestingly, Søren Kierkegaard criticizes the sort of reflection that moves away from self or that does not arrive at self-clarification requisite for purposeful activity (Taylor 156). In ministry, taking time for reflection is not a selfish indulgence but a necessity. When pastors fail to take the necessary time to reflect on their lives and ministry, their aimless wandering begins and pastors suffer from a greater vulnerability to sin. Pastors' times of reflection should include both moments with God in

prayer and accountability with other pastors/friends. Scripture affirms God is ever-present, and two people are better than one. One of the pastors in the group reported his weekly habit of taking a long prayerful walk early Sunday mornings to prepare himself to lead worship:

Far more treacherous is the chronic state of fatigue that sneaks up on us while we are enjoying ministry. It wraps its cold tentacles around us. The slow squeeze begins, and we find ourselves gasping for breath, wondering why we are losing our passion for preaching. (Taylor 64)

The most discerning among the congregations will pick up on this brokenness quickly and will want to see how the pastors handle their struggles.

The life, faith, and ministry of pastors are never solely about what pastors say in the pulpit but about who and what they are as well. In my informal conversations with colleagues, I discovered they had experienced the same phenomenon in their own annual evaluations. Attendance numbers, baptisms, new members, and offering amounts meant very little (at least until the relational aspects of the ministry were broken—the numbers come out as proof). I wanted to know on what these evaluations were based because for many pastors the numbers were not impressive. What congregations are most interested in is the integrity of pastors' lives and ministries and the love shown to people.

Pastors begin their work as servants and representatives of God who have been chosen. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (John 15:16a). Pastors do not choose ministry as much as they are chosen. Being chosen shines a very different light on ministry as a vocation. Ministry is not simply a job and cannot be perceived as such. Ministry is a calling by God. In ordination, pastors are set apart to represent, speak, and serve God with confidence and humility. Parishioners have a myriad of ideas for and expectations of pastors, wanting

“their pastors to be cloistered and contemplative scholars as well as aggressive, decisive administrators” (Hansen 74). Despite these competing images, pastors are grounded in their individual calling to use the gifts God has given them in the setting God has placed them. Otherwise, pastors will become as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon have described today’s pastor: a “quivering mass of availability” (39).

Ministry as a vocation differs from so many other jobs because of vastly different priorities. The bottom line in business is clear cut. The same bottom line in ministry is not as focused, possibly because spiritual elements are not easily measured or recorded. Using worldly business standards, much of a pastor’s time is wasted. William H. Willimon comments that ministry is not necessarily supposed to be efficient, citing the everyday occurrence of Jesus being consistently sidetracked. Jesus’ example demonstrates that those interruptions are the ministry rather than diversions from it (*Pastor* 62). Ministry is to be faithful as opposed to efficient. A “discipline of constancy” (315) is what pastors need—an ongoing effort to stay focused (whether that be in the study, study group, or the pastorate) and study to renew oneself, constantly exposing the heart, mind, and soul to new stories, ideas, and sermons.

According to Jim Collins, “good is the enemy of great” (116). In order for good companies to become great companies, they must transcend the “curse of competence” (13). For good pastors to become great pastors, they will have to escape the temptation of competence (of doing a “good job”) and look to the shared learning of a pastors’ study group as one of the key elements of their advance.

In a world and time when so many people have not been formed in the faith, pastors must stress doctrine, classical texts, master narratives, and great themes

(Willimon, *Pastor* 71). The ministry of the Word (preaching in this case) must be a continuing focus as it is the best use of a pastor's time. Preaching is counseling on a large scale. Ultimately, pastors are not meant to be administrators, volunteer coordinators, counselors, or managers, but preachers, teachers, and shepherd leaders. The wise pastor, in the face of these competing roles, is "constantly on the lookout for gifts which God has given in order to allow laity to do ministry" (Stott 205); however, some pastors command too much authority, lacking the ability to let go of control and noticeably missing any sense of pastoral touch. Their preaching and ministry is received as heavy handed or guilt laden.

Parishioners want access to pastors. They turn to their pastors for counsel, representing neither so-called common sense nor secular wisdom but being based on God's Word. Pastors must be careful not to offer their opinions only but to give their people counsel in helping them discern Scripture's meaning in each particular situation. Such counsel enlarges the ministry of the Word to include additional pastoral conversations (Oden 127). In ministry pastors come up against many tough questions. Willimon refers to the toughest question of all: "We come to the Biblical Text, raising questions about its relevance to our present daily lives, only to find that text questions us about our relevance to the way of Christ" (*Pastor* 131). Christianity truly is a countercultural movement, a truth that becomes clearer every day with competing religions right here in Anytown, USA, with society's struggles against materialism and selfishness and with the dynamic growth of Christianity in China, India, and other opening frontiers. Still, Christianity always runs the risk of being an intellectual pursuit rather than the revelation of a spiritual power.

Pastors' ministries should flow out of themselves and their connection with God.

He [pastors] must not always be trying to make sermons but always seeking truth, and out of the truth which he has won the sermons will make themselves... Here is the need of broad and generous culture. Learn to study for the sake of truth, learn to think for the profit and the joy of thinking. Then your sermons shall be like the leaping of a fountain, and not like the pumping of a pump. (Brooks 122-23)

One of the joys of serving as a pastor is the license to invest significant amounts of time seeking truth in and for a variety of settings.

Pastor as Preacher

The pulpit is where the pastor has the opportunity to shine. Some people will see their pastors at work through the week, but pastors get their greatest exposure to the public/congregation in the pulpit. Other aspects of ministry are important, but pastors' pulpit presence must be strong.

The sermon is a phenomenon because busy, twenty-first century people are willing to sit and listen to sermons Sunday after Sunday. Pastors can reach more people in those brief moments than they could individually in a month's time (Rowell and Goetz 150). Whether or not the sermon is inspiring to the hearers is heavily dependent upon the integrity of the one preaching. If pastors have integrity, a message will get through to the hearers. If not, every little thing will be cause for disbelieving the preacher's words. The message received may or may not be the one the pastors are preaching with their mouths, but a message is always communicated one way or another. Practicing what they preach is more important than all other measurable quantities. "Every preacher is giving two messages at the same time: one is what his words say, the other is what his personality is saying" (Sweazey 294).

Before this project, I lived off my own integrity to the exclusion of great preaching. “When a life of study is confined to ‘getting up sermons,’ very likely those sermons are undernourished” (Craddock, *Preaching* 69). My sermons were undernourished in their content, while my personal devotion time fueled a life of integrity. If pastors had to choose between integrity and content, they should choose integrity. Fortunately, they do not have to choose. I desire to give the congregation both integrity and content—to make both sermons (the one I am preaching and the one I am living out before them) excellent.

If for no other reason, I want to preach with excellence to fuel my own passion and faith:

And who can conceive of any greater motivation for preaching our very best than this; there is at least one person in the sanctuary listening, one person who, because of this sermon, may have a clearer vision, a brighter hope, and deeper faith, and fuller love. That person is the preacher. (Craddock, *Preaching* 222)

The need of pastors to have greater clarity, hope, faith, and love never ends.

The witness of pastors is only as believable as the fruit of their lives. John Killinger comments, “The art of preaching is to make a preacher and deliver that” (205). Preachers can be made partly in hospital rooms, living rooms, and board rooms, but without a consistent time of study and shared learning with others in their schedule, the opportunity for putting life and ministry all together will be missing. “If the heart is not right, the greatest wisdom and most careful preparation will result only in ‘sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal’” (Rossin and Rushke 141).

All preachers have times when their hearts are not “right” or at least are not inspired. “In a desperate state we start coming to God’s Word for sermon fodder, not to

fill our souls” (Rowell and Goetz 67). Among the weekly pressures of preaching, the temptation of preachers is to turn whatever personal study and/or devotional time into another opportunity for sermon preparation (masked or unmasked). Ultimately this constant preparing of sermons is a state of brokenness that will bring about spiritual emptiness in a matter of time, yet preaching with conviction in a time of personal, spiritual drought is not a sign of hypocrisy as much as it is an appropriate response to the calling and scriptural mandate to preach Christ at all times. In this case, the flavor of Rick Warren’s famous opening statement, “It’s not about you,” from his book, *The Purpose Driven Life* (17), holds true. Preaching is not about the preacher, but the preacher will always be the broken vessel through whom the message comes. “Our only hope in any work of the ministry, which is so far beyond our powers, is in staying close to God” (Sweazey 306). Finding and making time for study is a central issue in the pastor’s ministry. When study includes the input of others, its value increases exponentially.

The purpose of preaching is not to make the preacher known but to know Christ through the preacher’s message:

“I want to know Christ” (Phil. 3:10), not because it makes me preach better, but because it allows me to preach with integrity. It allows me to preach with hope. With a sensitive heart and with conviction. And that’s better than preaching better. (Rowell and Goetz 110)

Preachers are called to live the life they preach not just to preach better sermons.

Pastor as Leader

In addition to all the other duties of a leader, attitude and morale are carried or dropped by the leader. The Grubb Oscillation Theory explains how a group functioning with high trust only comes at the investment of a leader who cares (Powers 41).

Employees, volunteers, and clients look to the leader to shape their organization’s

climate. Leaders must take care to assure they remain in good body, mind, and spirit. Just as leaders need staff to carry out the work, leaders cannot handle this job of self-care alone, either. In order to create lasting change in their culture and in the leaders themselves, leaders need people around them. “The higher up the ladder a leader climbs, the less accurate his self-assessment is likely to be” (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee 92). A group of colleagues helps uncover blindspots.

I contend that leading a church is one of the most difficult leadership assignments known to humanity (Hybels, “Seekers” lecture) because in a church everyone is included member/nonmember, sacrificial giver, or not. No one has to follow the leader and every opinion counts. Leadership in the church is accomplished through influence. Parishioners are free to act on their own. While the bottom-line expectations may be considered soft by business persons and other professionals; nevertheless, the expectations swirling around pastors are endless. If at any point parishioners believe they have been slighted by the pastor, the pastor’s influence is gone with those parishioners and the pastor has fewer followers. As pastors, establishing themselves and their schedules are paramount in importance because if pastors do not establish priorities, others will establish priorities for them, usually to the detriment of all involved:

The pastor knows what is expected of him: live an exemplary life; be available at all times to all people for all purposes; lead the church to grow numerically; balance wisdom with leadership and love; teach people the deeper truths of the faith in ways that are readily applicable in all life situations; be a committed family man who demonstrates what it means to be the spiritual head of the family; a love of one woman and a positive role model for children; keep pace with the latest trends and developments in the church life; build significant relationships with members of the congregation; represent the church in the community; grow spiritually; and run the church in a crisp, professional, businesslike manner without taking on a cold, calculating air. (Barna 52)

Without a well-defined set of expectations set forth by the pastor or by the church leadership, expectations will set up every pastor for failure.

For organizational purposes, I have divided my overview of the pastor as leader into three parts: expectations, control, and passion.

Expectations

The pastor “feels like Sisyphus; every Monday he has to thrust his aching shoulder against the stone and start rolling it up the hill; and every Sunday it tumbles back down and the ordeal starts again” (Sweazey 112). Everything a pastor does builds towards Sunday. A pastor’s week does not peak early and fall off as Friday afternoon approaches; rather, it builds. Pastors’ weeks build from the moment they step in the office to begin the work week. While the week builds, “[p]astors are expected to be Winston Churchill, Mother Teresa, Joan of Arc and Ward Cleaver. It can give one a headache” (Galli, Cedar, Hughes, and Patterson 17). Everything about pastors is on display—life, family, body, and faith. The pastor’s fishbowl existence carries with it a great responsibility of witness. Therefore, I contend the most important thing for pastors is to fuel the foundation of their witness (love for Christ, family, and church family).

Control

The one job a leader cannot delegate is getting the right people in the right places (Bossidy and Charin 109). Right people are needed on staff, on decision-making and direction-setting boards, and in the leaders’ inner circle. John C. Maxwell has spent a lifetime—first in ministry now as a business consultant—touting, “A leader’s potential is determined by those closest to him” (109). Although a pastors’ study group may not set out to be mentors and be mentored by one another, the group has all the right elements to

serve in this fashion. The Saint-Gobain Corporation continues to pour money into synergistic opportunities for their employees. The corporation has witnessed huge profits and other successes due, in part, to their gatherings of random groups of staff from every division. Because the company sees the value of these gatherings, budget money is always available (Phelizon 23-24). Similarly, pastor-leaders must work to assure budget monies, and, more importantly for pastors, time will be available for their pastors' study group.

Pastors must control their schedules. The root of all pastors' time problems is found in their inability to say no and manage their ministries. Pastors who have not matured or have not found their way in ministry are the most likely candidates to say yes to everything. Accepting every invitation and idea leads to hardship and quite often to burnout, brownout (having energy but no direction), or resentment. Because of the broadly defined nature of pastors' work, ministry demands internal control. For better or worse, pastors have less peer supervision than many other vocations; thus, most often pastors are solely responsible for the way they use their time. If pastors do not know what is absolutely essential as compared to important, conflict awaits because in ministry just about everything can be considered important. Pastors have to decide what things are essential or most strategic (Willimon, *Pastor* 62, 317, 323-24). In my case, I asked my church leadership to discern the church's goals, so I could focus on the agreed-upon direction. Pastors who get their start in small country churches often are thankful for their start as it allows them to develop the habit of regular study. "Responsible leadership is in-depth learning" (Badaracco 107). Some kind of pastor group is in effect in most

communities (e.g., Ministerial Alliance). Such groups have to be sought out more intentionally in metropolitan areas.

In New Testament times as described in Acts 6, the apostles were faced with a difficult decision as Christianity and the church began to grow. The Grecian Jewish widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food, yet the apostles were being spread too thin to help these widows with their needs and continue the apostles' ministry of the Word. Many of these widows along with their now late husbands had gladly surrendered any monetary savings to be part the church and follow Jesus. The church could not overlook their needs (Wiersbe 14). The solution was to name deacons who would care for the widows while the apostles continued their other essential work.

Dealing with the problem of pastors having too much to do, Joseph E. McCabe proposes a method for gaining more time for pastors. The three parts of his program are (1) the exchange sermon—pulpit exchange three to four times a year; (2) the repeat sermon—chosen from a survey of the congregation as to which sermons they would like to hear again (similar to a favorite choral anthem); and, (3) the borrowed sermon—preaching someone else's sermon while announcing and printing the name of the author. All totaled, this program could save the pastor two weeks of work, freeing the pastor for other work, and the preaching would be better than otherwise (50-52).

“Askesis” is the term used by Eugene H. Peterson to describe a voluntary or involuntary time of confinement for the purpose of prayer and reflection (*Under the Unpredictable Plant* 88). Focusing on the story of Jonah, Peterson points out if pastors do not make concessions for time away, those times will rise up unexpectedly and demand pastors' attention at less convenient times. Askesis is a subtle means of dealing with

pastors' egos that scream out notions of the church not going on apart from them and their leadership even for a few days. Many pastors begin to treat their ministries simply like professions; askesis is a means of moving away from religious careerism.

Pastors must prioritize their work. "Explore your schedule, as well as your heart, to determine how high a priority God is in your life" (Barna 40). Pastors' study is a continuing process of maintaining the foundational elements of one's work and life—Covey's "sharpen the saw" (288). This sharpening includes intellectual, spiritual, physical, and relational development:

A minister's time is one of the most valuable resources in the church. It is far too valuable to be used casually or randomly. Success, for both the minister and the church, depends of how effectively the minister's time is used. (Douglas and McNally 14)

Church consultant Reggie McNeil says Christian ministries must shift from an internal to an external focus. The time pastors spend focused on the institution of the church can be toxic to the pastors' faith.

Passion

Persons who know what they believe draw a crowd. The world is drawn to certainty—even when that certainty goes against what the world believes because life is filled with so much uncertainty (Stanley). Certainty brings hope. Never has the church found pastors to be so uncertain. Fred B. Craddock comments, "Rarely, if ever, in the history of the church have so many firm periods slumped into commas, so many triumphant exclamation points curled into question marks" (*As One without Authority* 11). Fire in the preaching depends on fire in the preacher—passion comes from the Holy Spirit. Pastors are fueled by regular time of study, devotion and sharing, giving the Spirit (and colleagues) access to their hearts and souls. When pastors are passive in this area

and fail to speak up, they effectively surrender their study time and all the benefits that come as a result of it (Willimon, *Clergy and Laity Burnout* 65). “We are most effective and thereby most fulfilled, when we are acting from inner directives rather than reacting to whatever the people around us want from us” (Mosley 17). Reactionary ministry quickly becomes a disaster as important tasks give way to urgent pleas. Pastors who ultimately concede their ministries to the most urgent cries are unfaithful in indirect ways. The nature and role of the pastoral task is best discerned through prayerful theological reflection.

The sabbatical may be the ultimate expression of the ongoing study; however, obvious differences exist between the ongoing pastors’ study group I used and the idea of a sabbatical. Just as pastors make time for regular study, pastors should include time for a sabbatical among their multiyear plans. I have made no effort to address the consequences (good and bad) of sabbaticals. Such a study would be an excellent extension for another time.

Importance of Preaching

Preaching is foolishness, yet preaching is the means God chooses to spread his Word and wisdom. The spiritual gift of preaching does not belong to every pastor; nevertheless, pastors are called to preach on behalf of God. “The ministry of proclamation (preaching) is central to the pastor’s task” (Connell 23). George H. Sweazey clarifies that preaching is not the church’s most important activity; nothing inside the building is. The church’s most important activity occurs when it is dispersed in the world. Nevertheless, because sermons affect the character of Christians dispersed into the world, preaching is at the heart of all the church does in and out (3).

With such a heightened role and significance for preaching, pastors must invest the time to prepare the message and the messenger. “Preaching that is not informed and shaped by large chunks of study time is not worth doing” (Craddock, *Preaching* 24). Those large chunks are what pastors are fighting for amid their busy schedules and lives. This project lived out and gave credence to Craddock’s plea. Richard John Neuhaus adds, “Pastors who boast of how little time they spend in sermon preparation may be unusually glib, but they are, I suspect without exception, saying more about their people’s patience than about their preaching ability” (201). Appropriate efforts to preach for God demands hard work and time. Individual preparation, prayer, and study are keys, along with shared perspectives and ideas for others.

Jesus says, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5c). His simple statement is given at least in part to keep pastors humble by holding their egos in check. Ministry is never about the pastor and always about the Spirit of God within.

Pastor as Theologian

Within this category, I am including the image of the pastor not only as a theologian but also as a student—one who is always learning and who disciplines himself or herself to think deeply. At the close of this section, I review several ideas for how pastors can best invest their time in study.

Martin Luther considered himself a “constant beginner” in the learning of his vocation and recommended regular study of the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and baptism (Lathrop 17). Luther believed pastors’ faith would constantly be stirred by learning and relearning the symbols of the faith (a lifelong

catechumenate), noting the danger of becoming a symbol themselves in the office of priest.

Physicians offer diagnoses. Attorneys offer legal solutions. Pastors offer interpretations. Pastors are theologians called to interpret the nature and significance of God in the world. One cannot correctly discern or interpret the world without being in touch with the Creator and God's Creation. The preacher's life must be a life of large accumulation. Out of the accumulation of ideas and perspectives pastors interpret, filter, and project what God's Word has to say on any given subject. People come not to hear what pastors know; people come to hear what pastors discern from God and God's Word that applies to a particular context. The message (spoken or unspoken) must be given in a way the people can understand and apply to their lives (Hamilton, 13). "Overflow" is Killinger's word (188). Pastors, more than any other professionals, depend on the constant flow and accumulation of ideas, information, and stories. The more information flows in, the more information a pastor has from which to choose. Once the responsibility of weekly preaching is handed to pastors, they will always be looking for something to say. Without reading widely, thinking deeply, and conversing with others, a pastor will be out of ideas and stories within a year. Whereas salespersons may work their lifetimes perfecting their sales approach adjusting their approach only slightly in each context, pastors make their sales speech over and over again to an audience that is, on average, 80 percent constant from week to week. Passion in ministry can carry a pastor only so far and so long before the hard work of preaching and ministry begins, finding a new way to make old news good news again. C. H. Spurgeon says, "He who no longer sows in the study will no more reap in the pulpit" (236). Pastors as theologians understand much of

their time in study does not necessarily give them specific ideas for daily ministry; rather, time in study looms like an iceberg (Killinger 188), making obvious only a small portion of itself yet having a much larger presence than imagined. Christians are better served (and thus, serve better), when they walk, work, think, study, and pray together.

The theologian walks a narrow road between the world of the Bible and the world of humankind. “To withdraw from the world into the Bible (which is escapism), or from the Bible into the world (which is conformity), will be fatal to our preaching ministry” (Stott 180). The theologian’s responsibility is to discern the vital connections between the world and the Bible and speak into them. Wise pastors invest the time necessary to share their thoughts with others beforehand, a process that refines and sharpens their thoughts. “The preacher of the twenty-first century will be one-part theologian, one-part sociologist, one-part evangelist, and one-part mystic” (Johnston 79). In order to handle all these roles effectively, one must pray fervently, read widely, think deeply, and share in groups. In the community, pastors must be looking for connections between the everyday and the holy—and one to another. Making oneself aware of the holy fights back against the natural curb to make the Word merely human wisdom and intellect.

The connection between preaching and church growth is demonstrated in most growing churches. Worship in these churches brings about life change and is a constant flow of encouragement. “Good preaching” is not measured by church growth standards; it is measured by faithfulness to God. Craddock contends that faithful preaching will lead to growth in the congregation (*Preaching* 6-7).

While this project did not focus on preaching as much as it focused on the shared thoughts and study time of pastors and the change in spiritual maturity during the six

months, the preaching of pastors will show the results of their study. I have made no attempt to address issues involved in specific sermon preparation or in styles of preaching. I believe any style of preaching (e.g., inductive, deductive, narrative, exegetical) can be effective because one's preaching is most affected by the integrity of the pastor.

As for the focus of the pastor's study, the following are some of the helpful thoughts I discovered in the overview of literature. In his book, Sire offers these three tenants. First, God wants Christians to think well. They are to love God with all their minds, too. Second, thinking is rarely a matter of cold heartless, calculating logic. Thinking feels. Unity exists between thinking and feeling. Third, thinking well is integral to acting righteously—to know the truth is to do it (9-10). John R. W. Stott says, "Study should be: (1) comprehensive (only then will the Word give up its treasures), (2) open minded, and (3) expectant" (182). Pastors should read widely so the Spirit can speak through a variety of means. Pastors can form the hopeful discipline of expecting to hear from God yet not anticipating what God's message to them will be. Thomas C. Oden talks about "a threefold correlation between the revealed word in Christ, the written word in Scripture and the proclaimed word in our own contemporary language" (128). With this quote, he sets the stage for these elements in the study: prayer, study of Scripture, and reading of current literature. According to Gordon A. Lathrop, "the classic topics of theology should take a major place" (106) in pastors' reading. The goal of reading is not utilitarian, not how to, but instead pastors need time to dwell on the classic questions of theology. Finally from a practical perspective, Sweazey reminds pastors that one of the best study sources are the sermons of others (179), while Stott encourages pastors to

include themselves in a reading group (195) in order to glean from the minds of several pastors and theologians. Craddock adds that informing the congregation of your study schedule is helpful for both pastor and parishioner (*Preaching* 76). Congregations, themselves, are encouraged to study by realizing their own studies; pastors are less likely to be interrupted when their parishioners know pastors are studying.

In his writings, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux understood the true value of study.

There are many who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity. There are others who desire to know in order that they may be known: that is vanity. Others seek knowledge in order to sell it: that is dishonorable. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to edify others: that is love. (qtd. in Sire 216)

As pastors, the act of acquiring more knowledge is an act of love.

Dissertations and Leading Pastors

The ministry of the Word is not limited to the four walls of the church, Ministry should take place wherever hearers of the Word exist. In other words, the concept of preaching needs a broader definition, one including a variety of settings—hospital bedsides, counseling sessions, church camps, and restaurant booths. This broader definition is consistent with my understanding of study, too, which is inclusive of not only time spent in the pastor’s study but also out among God’s creation (i.e., people and places).

The biblical foundation for this project begins with the principle of sowing and reaping. Obviously, ministry improves when significantly more time is spent in study and in group reflection. While the principle of sowing and reaping is true, it does not address the whole range of this study.

John 1:14 tells of the Incarnation of Christ: “The Word became flesh and made

his dwelling among us.” Matthew’s gospel proclaims, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us.’” (1:23). Preaching the Word of God and speaking on God’s behalf is incarnational in nature. Perhaps the most important work of the pastor is not what happens in gathering and organizing the words, thoughts, stories, and examples in the sermon but what happens in the pastor when more time is invested in faithfully hearing and pondering with others God’s Word. The credibility of pastors is raised by their connection to God. Pastors bring their God-connection with them to worship.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the pastors who go on the Internet Saturday evening and download their messages for Sunday, making sermon preparation time and the necessity for study virtually nil. Sermon Web sites get the most hits Saturday evenings from 9:00-10:00 p.m. These sermons, complete with worship helps (PowerPoint slides and song suggestions), are available from any number of resources, are most often free, and most conveniently, are anonymous. I believe this practice is primarily used by the thousands of bi-vocational pastors who work full-time jobs before turning their attention to Sunday’s sermon. If congregations were to consider pastors without the gift of preaching, give them sermons from someone else who either has the spiritual gift of preaching or who has a staff of researchers to prepare messages, then at least these average preachers have something good to offer their congregations. These pastors certainly would have time to invest in other avenues of ministry, paying huge dividends in spiritual growth while sacrificing very little (if anything) on preaching and teaching content. The problem with this approach goes back to the incarnational spirit. While the words of these downloaded sermons are no doubt well-written and thought out,

the thoughts and the preacher delivering them have no connection. God has not been given the opportunity to work on these preachers before they stand up to speak on behalf of God. Further research along these lines would add more fruit to the nature of this issue.

Standard wisdom in preachers' circles encourages young pastors to guard themselves against the temptation to combine too closely their personal devotion time with God and their sermon preparation time. Implicit in that wisdom is the idea they will eventually lose their own connection and relationship to God by turning all of their time together with God into work. I have found my times of personal and pastoral study inseparable just as I have found the person I am inseparable from the pastor I am. I have attempted to separate my sermon preparation time from my reading and participation in this project.

I agree pastors should heed these words of warning to the extent they sense their relationship with God fading away. The key to being able to offer truth is the seeking out of truth in the quiet moments of minds and hearts before God. For more mature pastors, perhaps that wisdom could be overlooked in favor of another kind of wisdom that knows, at its best, the sermon flows out of the heart, mind, and study of pastors. Such messages are genuine and cannot be manufactured regardless of the polish and shine pastors put on their style and delivery. Each week God gives pastors bread to feed their people. Still, they must spend some time in the kitchen preparing the bread. Those are important hours because their people are often picky eaters (Robinson 67-68).

Pastors have arrived at this investment in preparation through an intentional process, choosing to spend their time in study as opposed to the myriad of other scheduling possibilities a large church setting such as theirs presents. "Every preacher of

the gospel can do a better job preaching through more thorough preparation” (Crader 7). Scheduling is a choice pastors make. Administrative details can easily take over the schedule of a less focused pastor. This study shows that collegial sharing of perspectives has great value though this value is difficult to measure.

Coming from a different perspective, Warren of Saddleback Community Church speaks as though his research staff does all his preparation work for him; however, a closer look at this situation reveals that though Warren does have researchers who help him considerably, his comments are an attempt at modesty in an effort to deflect some of the accolades he receives for his preaching and teaching. His Web site receives thousands of hits per week, and his sermons are heard all over the world at weekend services by his own congregation and those of the hundreds of pastors who borrow Warren’s sermons. He encourages his preacher followers not to give him credit for his messages but to preach them as their own. To do otherwise is to take away from God’s Word. Warren has decided, intentionally or unintentionally, that solid, biblical messages are most important for churches—whether the preachers who preach them embody (incarnate) those messages is secondary. The long-term effects of this phenomenon would be an interesting study. I have measured the opposite practice in this study, believing incarnation is essential in preaching and ministry.

Thom Rainer found that preachers of growing, healthy congregations spend five times more time in sermon preparation and study than do preachers of plateauing or declining churches (76). John Bisagno offers the following comment:

A preacher’s preaching must be his priority. My people will forgive a missed hospital call or an unaccepted social invitation, but there is no forgiveness, there is no excuse for a poorly prepared or ineptly delivered sermon. Weak preaching builds weak sheep that necessitate hours and

hours of counseling and personal ministry. I prefer to put the emphasis on preaching and teaching and build strong sheep that can more easily stand alone, rather than emphasize propping up weak sheep created by poor preparation, inept delivery, and powerless preaching. (qtd. in Allen and Gregory 476)

Looking into the minds of other great pastors, theologians, and colleagues fuels preaching like nothing else.

Pastors and church leaders can learn from Acts 6. All ministry has great value in the eyes of the Lord, yet as Michael Slaughter and the leadership team at Ginghamburg United Methodist Church are proud to say, “Some ministries are more strategic than others.” When one considers the continued heightened status of worship in churches today, preaching the Word should have priority over any other ministry because during worship the greatest percentage of members and guests (churched and unchurched) are present and attentive. Without creating a grave imbalance, investing as much as possible in preparation for this hour of worship offers the highest return. Other members with corresponding spiritual gifts can effectively carry out other ministries while the pastor focuses on the sermon as a time for enabling and encouraging spiritual growth and reaching the lost. Sally Morgenthaler says, “Until we put worship back in its rightful place as the number one activity of the Church, our churches will be malnourished and lacking the spiritual power necessary to do God’s work” (50). The number one element of worship is the sermon.

Recognizing the importance of preaching and reclaiming my ordination charge to preach caused me to reflect on the patterns I had developed in ministry. In this project, I was looking for the change in my congregation’s perception of my spiritual maturity. I was not interested in performance issues, how well I deliver the message, but in the

outcome of my ministry as a result of more time in study with colleagues.

What I wanted to know was whether including a regular (i.e., weekly) time of study would have a significant effect on my own spiritual growth as opposed to investing that same time in another aspect of life or ministry. For this study I measured the outcomes of regular study time.

I referred to three specific dissertations with a related focus.

1. Southerland researched similarities and differences between growing and nongrowing Baptist congregations in Florida. Referring often to Samuel Blizzard's earlier work on prioritizing roles of pastors, Southerland did find a correlation between the growth of churches and the ongoing activity and priorities of their pastors.

2. Connell's work was similar in nature to Southerland's, focusing on time management elements among Wesleyan pastors of growing churches in the United States and Canada. A similar correlation was found.

3. Crader's dissertation project is titled, "The Relationship of the Pastor's Sermon Preparation Methods to Average Worship Attendance in the Churches of the Missouri East Conference of the United Methodist Church." Crader began with the assumption that larger attendance must be a result of better preaching and, as this study assumes, better preaching comes as a result of better preparation. The study showed no correlation between attendance and preaching preparation. A strong intervening variable in this study was the historical attendance averages prior to the current pastor's ministry, particularly if the pastor had been there less than five years. Congregational attendance patterns are shaped over decades and, therefore, are not necessarily reflective of the current pastorate.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

A relationship with Jesus Christ is the central aspect of Christianity and Christian ministry. In calling a new pastor, pulpit committees often list strong abilities in preaching, leadership, vision, administration, and pastoral care as priority qualities in a pastor, but more than anything else church people want a pastor whose relationship with Christ is solid, alive, and well.

Out of necessity, pastors must make the most of their time each week. While administrative tasks may rule a good portion of the week, relational elements of the ministry must rule the weekend worship services. The pastor's greatest opportunity to touch, influence, guide, teach, and reach the community is in corporate worship. Preachers owe these people the very best preaching possible. Henry Emerson Fosdick says, "Preaching is personal counseling on a large scale" (6). To encourage, teach, preach, and model the faith to the congregation in worship, the pastor must make the effort to stay connected both to God and neighbor through a personal and corporate time of study and reflection. People come to experience the presence of the living God in worship. Along with the worship leaders, the pastor must be comfortable in leading the congregation to God.

Spiritual formation is priority work in every ministry and every congregation approaches spiritual formation differently; the possibilities are endless. Corporate worship is the most obvious means of connecting with people due to the voluntary, yet captive audience at every weekend worship service. In most settings, corporate worship is not the most effective way to create spiritual growth.

In the history of Christianity, the worship service has survived as the most effective ministry of the Christian community through the centuries with Christ as the unifying agent (and the pastor as leader). The pastor's sermon is not merely teaching, nor is it the preacher's time to say a few good words about Jesus and his Father. The sermon is the body of Christ's (communal) best opportunity to hear from God on a weekly basis and to be drawn closer to God. This thought alone should strike a chord of fear in anyone who stands to preach. In a real way, the preacher represents and is speaking for God. Because pastors are constantly called on to be frontline witnesses, they do well to gather with other pastors along the way who will help one another process life, faith, and ministry.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the spiritual growth in six pastors of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Northwest Arkansas, as a result of their participation in a pastors' study group that met for six months to discuss their reading of classic and contemporary, theological texts.

My hope was to identify a model for a pastors' study group that would encompass significant study, discussion, reflection, accountability, and spiritual growth in a shared learning experience.

Research Question #1

According to the survey results, submitted mid-test paragraphs, and posttest interviews, what kind of spiritual growth occurred in the pastors over the six-month period?

The survey results offered the quantitative aspects of the project using the data

given by the pastors themselves and their respective leadership groups.

The submitted mid-test paragraphs detailed some of thoughts of the pastors as they were enjoying the group experience yet struggling to keep up with the reading.

The interviews offered the more qualitative aspects of the project by allowing the pastors to express in their own words their evaluative comments about their experience with the pastors' study group.

Research Question #2

According to submitted mid-test paragraphs and posttest interviews, what elements of pastors' lives, ministries, and attitudes have kept them from engaging in this form of reading and discussion prior to this experience?

This question dealt with the underlying components of pastors' lives and attitudes that have discouraged their participation in study groups prior to this group.

The answer to this question came squarely from the posttest interviews. The obvious answer is time, but do they have reasons other than time limitations? What is the role of familiarity with the participants? Is the makeup of the group as or more important than the structure or content of the study? These and other surprising elements came out in the interviews.

Research Question #3

What are some critical needs in pastors' spiritual growth process best satisfied by pastoral colleagues?

I sought to identify unique needs pastors have and a suitable means of meeting those needs. The mid-test paragraphs and interviews provided insight to this question.

Clergy burnout, depression, loneliness, and apathy are some of the hard realities

of ministry today. Each of the participants in this pastors' study group seemed to be emotionally, physically, and spiritually healthy. Still, pastors struggle to avoid such hardships. Spiritual growth is dependent on the emotional health of the pastor. Are pastoral colleagues an important part of the mix (along with spouses, family, and friends) in maintaining emotional health?

Research Question #4

What is the value of the shared learning in an ongoing reading and discussion group made up of pastoral colleagues?

This question sought to identify the positive aspects of pastors' study groups beyond avoidance of burnout or depression. Why does the experience of a study group spur pastors on and encourage them to make steps of faith in their congregations and ministries? How can study groups help to move pastors beyond survival to significance (different from success)? Again, the answer to this question was found in the pastors' paragraphs and interviews.

Participants

I recruited five pastors to join me in this project. These five pastors are all men between the ages of 37 and 47, pastoring mainline churches in Northwest Arkansas. They were chosen by proximity, denominational affiliation, and amiability. I am personal friends with four of the five—the fifth pastor being an acquaintance of mine whom I had scouted and believed would fit well with the group. Having had negative or weak experiences with pastors' study groups in the past, I knew that choosing the group would be a key aspect of its success. If I introduced needy people into the group, I could be sure the group would not flourish. Getting the right people in the right places is the job of

leadership. I knowingly chose some colleagues over others to participate in order to allow harmony and equal participation.

Instrumentation

Spiritual growth and maturity were difficult to measure as anticipated. Because spiritual growth can come from any number of influences in a person's life, proving what the dynamics of the growth are—what initiated the growth and what sustained, contained, or drained it—is problematic. Spiritual growth cannot be limited to one or two influential elements; it comes from a plethora of experiences. Nevertheless, by measuring the perspectives of the same group of leaders from each pastor's congregation at a six-month interval, I was able to measure the potential effects of certain independent variables on the spiritual formation of the pastor.

The author used the Spiritual Maturity Index (see Appendix A) as a pre- and posttest measure. The survey was administered to each pastor on 7 June 2007 and 11 November 2007. The pastors, in turn, administered the Spiritual Maturity Index (in third person form, see Appendix C) to a body of church leaders from their separate congregations in the months of June and November/December 2007. Additionally, I personally interviewed each of the pastors in November 2007 using a self-designed set of questions (see Appendix B).

The pretest survey identified the current level of spiritual maturity and serves as a baseline for the beginning of the study. This information would be used later as a comparison marker from which to determine an increase or decrease in spiritual maturity in the participating pastors during the test period. Once this marker had been ascertained through the pre-study survey, I introduced the independent variable and the pastors began

their reading and meetings for a period of six months as an additional aspect of their full-time service in congregations around the region.

The premise of this research project was that an investment of time in study along with the regular meeting of colleagues would create a synergistic experience, allow for spiritual growth in pastors, and allow for more effective ministries.

I recruited five pastors by personal phone call or visit to join me in this project. I explained my expectations of each participant in detail: six meetings, five books purchased by the participants, pre- and posttest surveys of both the pastors and a group of their congregational leaders, mid-point paragraphs with reflections on the group experience, and finally personal interviews with me. Our first meeting date was 7 June 2007. I confirmed the date by e-mail and letter. In preparation for our first meeting at which we would choose our reading materials for the study, I mailed portions of Peterson's *Take and Read* to each of the participating pastors. The mailing's cover letter asked the pastors to skim the book and make notations of listed titles of interest to them and within our focus. I also contacted several resource persons asking them for their suggestions within our boundaries. At the initial meeting, the pastors' study group went through a formal process of selecting five readings. I explained the criteria for the chosen texts ("classic" theological texts—staying away from pragmatic books and/or books already read by any of the participants) with focus on these areas: (1) devotional life, (2) discipleship, (3) Sabbath, (4) thinking, and (5) community.

At the meeting, I explained the project's history to date, reviewed the expectations of their participation, and joined the group in choosing five texts to read—the design of the study. The texts fit the following criteria: classic theology as opposed to pragmatic

(how to) books or the latest title by a current day, big name author.

The succeeding meetings happened over sack lunches at the churches of the various pastors. Each meeting began with general greetings and conversation as pastors arrived. After an opening prayer, one of the pastors (as facilitator) initiated a general review of the reading. Facilitator's duties rotated among the group. Much discussion followed, and not once did the facilitator get through his prepared remarks before our time had elapsed.

Before departing, I handed out the next text (having been purchased in volume online) and confirmed the next meeting date, time, and location. At the sixth meeting, the group took time to complete the posttest survey before discussing the text for that day.

I recruited a Research Reflection Team from First Christian Church Rogers. I picked persons who would be honest and insightful in their evaluations, faithful in their words and deeds, and who would draw from their own significant education. Among the team were two persons with doctoral degrees and three persons with master's degrees.

Validity and Reliability

The most difficult part of a study such as this one is to create, develop, or find an instrument to measure spiritual formation in a person. Because spiritual formation is multifaceted in nature, narrowing the study to measure only one variable requires the use of a multifaceted instrument. I have limited the variables by the repetition of and the phrasing of the questions in both of the surveys given to the congregational leaders.

These surveys include questions about the participants' thoughts, actions, and reactions to the pastor and his preaching over a period of six months. Second, I designed the posttest interviews to give information on the affective elements of the study—

thoughts and feelings, in response to the pastors' experience in the group.

Spiritual formation in a person is affected by any number of variables. These variables can only be controlled and/or limited to a certain degree. Each person will respond differently to a pastor due to any number of factors. In the pastor's preaching, illustrations may stir particular responses in some of the hearers. A particular passage of Scripture may have a stigma attached to it in someone's mind. Similarly, the hearer may have personal issues affecting the responses—ill health, strained relationships, or everyday stresses of life.

The strongest marker of the effectiveness or value of the pastors' study group was the personal, posttest interviews (see Appendix D), offering qualitative evaluations of the project.

Data Collection

On 7 June and 11 November 2007, I administered the Spiritual Maturity Index to each of the pastors' study group as a self-study. I took part in the survey as well. I handed out the survey at the first and last monthly meeting of the pastors' study group. Once each of the participants arrived and exchanged greetings, I handed out the surveys. I gave the pastors time to complete the surveys during the group meeting time to assure timely completion.

The pastors took a third-person version of the Spiritual Maturity Index to a body of lay leaders within their congregations during the same months at a regularly scheduled meeting. Again, I allotted time during meetings of my lay leaders for them to complete the surveys and assure timely completion.

The Research Reflection Team then met to compile and analyze the data. Each

of the responses on the Spiritual Maturity Index had a numerical value on a Likert scale. For the leaders' surveys, the Research Team used a simple averaging of responses to each question—separating out the reverse questions and assigning opposite values to them—then they tallied a total average score, one for each pastor's personal survey and another for the overall survey results of the pastor's leadership team. The team noted and recorded increases and decreases in the pre- and posttest scores.

I interviewed each of the five other pastors in November within one week of their final group meeting. I created verbatim transcriptions of each interview (see Appendix D). I made no efforts to pilot test or refine the interview questions. The Spiritual Maturity Index survey was not researcher designed, so I did not alter its structure. I did change the survey's wording from first to third person for use by the leadership groups.

In September, I sent an e-mail to each of the pastors asking for a brief paragraph describing their thoughts and experiences with the pastors' study group to date. I received four responses over the next two weeks (see Appendix E).

Independent and Dependent Variables

This study had one independent variable—participation in a six-month pastors' study group. The main focus of the project was the outcome of perceived spiritual growth in the pastor as a result of participating in the study group as perceived by the pastors themselves and a body of leaders from their congregations.

The study's dependent variables were essentially the perceived spiritual growth and/or the ongoing spiritual formation of the pastors as a result of the pastors' study group.

Control

Numerous variables present themselves anytime one tries to measure particular aspects of spiritual growth and formation. In order to have a reliable study, I controlled these variables to the greatest extent possible.

I carried out the study over a period of six months. With all the possible scenarios in pastors' lives affecting their spiritual growth, the length of the study was an important factor in gaining a broad scope of the pastor's general perspective over the positive and negative times of life. A study length of three years seems to be the preferred duration for studies involving ongoing groups measuring spiritual growth. A duration of three years was not possible for this project.

Data Analysis

My Research Reflection Team compiled the results of the Spiritual Maturity Index's twenty questions and the Likert scale answers. Of the thirty questions, twelve had reverse values. My team scored and recorded each survey. They averaged numerical values from each survey completed by a pastor's leadership group. Then a comparison was made between pre- and posttest survey results. My team compared the pastors' pre- and posttest self-surveys.

The strength of this research is found in the qualitative measurements through personal interviews more than the quantitative survey results.

Ethical Procedures

The participants in my study will remain anonymous. When I called to recruit them, I described in detail what we would be doing and that their names would not be revealed. The pastors' agreement to join my study served as their verbal consent.

No names of pastors or the churches they serve were written on the survey. My Research Reflection Team processed the anonymous surveys. Finally, all of the surveys from pastors and lay leaders were destroyed after processing.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter describes the development and the implementation of a pastors' study group. I have examined the design of the group as well as the group experience itself.

The purpose of this project was to measure the value (spiritual growth, professional development, self-care) of pastors' participation in a study group. My idea was to create a means for spiritual growth, wisdom, and maturity but also to create an environment where my colleagues and I could be challenged to new heights of faith and service, encouraged to take risks for God and led to "press on toward the goal for which Christ Jesus has called [us] heavenward" (Phil. 3:14).

During my coursework in the Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury Theological Seminary, I encountered the driving passion of Dr. Stephen Seamands, the quest for knowledge from Dr. Joseph Dongell, and the need for balance in ministry from Dr. Mike Powers. Combining the teachings of these men with the powerful spoken words of Bill Hybels, Adam Hamilton, and Bob Russell (among others), I felt as though I had experienced a brand new call to ministry. Later, when I considered the topic of my dissertation project, I wanted to avail myself to God and a variety of God's servants through the study of his Word and related writings both classic and contemporary, worldly and otherworldly.

I set out to create, experience and evaluate some innovative approach to ministry. Initially, my idea was to set aside significant time for personal study, devotion, and prayer. I wanted to see if my investment over a six-month period would be evident to the

congregation I serve. At my approval hearing, the individual element of the initial project idea was improved to include a team of pastors rather than just myself—to develop a peer-related learning model. I loved the idea of including other pastors in the project and knew the study would be richer with their participation. However, I also knew that the colleagues I had in mind to join me were busy people. I use the word *busy* to mean passionate about their calling, not as Peterson comments, “The word busy is the symptom not of commitment but of betrayal. It is not devotion but defection” (*Contemplative Pastor* 17). I doubted they would be willing to invest the time necessary to give this project validity. Originally, I had planned to invest one full morning a week to individual study. My mentor and I agreed a full morning each week was too much to ask (my colleagues later verified our decision). Due to the parameters of my doctoral program, I also knew that I had roughly a six-month time period. My mentor and I decided a program of six months, meeting once a month for ninety minutes, would have to suffice. In between meetings, each participating pastor would be required to read one book and prepare to discuss the reading in-depth.

Prior to this pastors’ study group, our collective experience in pastors’ groups (e.g., denominational gatherings, community ministerial alliances) had not been worthwhile. Some groups attempt to force participants into an uncomfortable level of interaction and disclosure, while other groups tend to be superficial and lacking depth. Each of us had experienced the frustration and discomfort of needy persons spilling their lives in a group. We agreed none of us were hungering for such a group. Our study group began with a foundation of faith, trust, and strength in Christ as opposed to the hurt, burnout, and depression so prevalent among clergy today.

Connally C. Gamble notes criticisms of a variety of programs are twofold: (1) objectives are not well defined, and (2) the programs are not extensive enough (24). This project's objectives were well defined—the pastors knew the objective was to measure the value of our participation in a pastors' study group through self-evaluations and surveys of our congregation's leadership. Unfortunately, the timetable was too brief to create any noticeable, measurable, or specific spiritual growth in the participants.

In my conversations with other colleagues, I have confirmed that two to three years in duration (meeting ten to fifteen days per year) is a good time frame. One of the pastors in this study participated in a Lilly endowment project. Protocol for such study groups appears to be three years in order for the time, study, and experience together to be significant. Having a consistent time over a period of years is the goal. To no one's surprise, the process of creating lasting, noticeable, and specific spiritual growth takes longer than six months, five books, and nine hours together. Although, this project fell short of being an innovative approach to spiritual growth among pastors who participate in a pastors study group, this project nevertheless has unearthed some significant findings from a qualitative perspective. Quantitative results offered little insight given the myriad of independent variables involved in six months of a pastor's life. The mid-test paragraphs submitted by the pastors, the posttest interviews, and my personal observations provided the significant findings.

In broadening the project to include other pastors, I gave up control of the process but gained the synergy of shared insight. While three of the five authors qualify as classic, the individual texts we chose were not necessarily so. As the selection process narrowed, the group was adamant about including at least one contemporary author. Here

is a list of the chosen texts in order for the months June/July through October/November:

Pensées—Blaise Pascal,

Sabbath Time—Tilden Edwards,

A Community of Character—Stanley Hauerwas,

Generous Orthodoxy—Brian McLaren, and

The Hungering Dark—Frederick Buechner.

While each of the participating pastors were friends of mine, I faced a constant struggle balancing the requirements for my dissertation and the demands I was placing on them as busy pastors. I found the recruitment process much easier than I had imagined, each of the five pastors I contacted agreed to take part wholeheartedly and seemed to understand the full extent of the project. Among the study group (five recruits and me) were two Doctor of Ministry and four Master's of Divinity degrees. All six are male. Five of the six are married; none have suffered divorce. Four have children at home; two have no children. Four had been in Northwest Arkansas for ten years or more. I was close to four of the pastors, the other one being an acquaintance whom I trusted.

As the group lived out its purpose over the six-month period, I knew as important as this project was to me, the other pastors were focused on the group experience, occasionally at the expense of the research. From the beginning, I asked them to keep a simple journal of some of their thoughts along the way. No one kept a journal. The surveys we completed during our meetings went well (though the surveys seemed forced into our setting). Obtaining the surveys requested from their congregation's leadership was difficult at best. I was tempted to blame the response on the fact that I did not employ an electronic means of transmitting that information; however, despite having an

electronic means of responding at other times, other pieces of information also came in slowly, if at all. I found myself having to send multiple e-mails and make multiple reminder phone calls to receive the paragraphs.

The group format was based on these assumptions: (1) The most effective means of creating spiritual growth in congregations is to create spiritual growth in pastors; (2) an effective means of creating spiritual growth in pastors is to involve the pastors in a peer related study group; (3) pastors will require ongoing support and study opportunities far beyond the six months of this study; and, (4) the time needed to create noticeable, spiritual growth in persons is longer than the six months allotted here. Regardless, the project could succeed in gaining a summary vision of the benefits of pastors' study groups.

Statistical Analysis

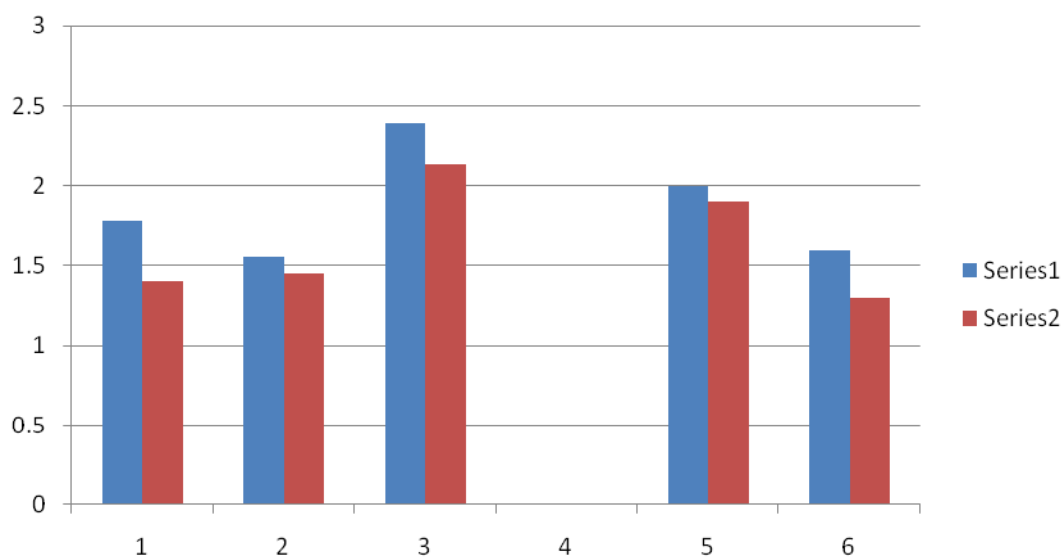
Over a six-month period (June-November 2007), I carried out my project with the participation of five other pastors. During the preceding and succeeding months, I researched the other aspects of the following research questions.

Research Question #1

According to the survey results, submitted mid-test paragraphs, and posttest interviews, what kind of spiritual growth occurred in the pastors over the six-month period?

As a pre- and posttest survey for both individual pastors and their respective leadership groups, I employed the Spiritual Maturity Index. The index has thirty questions of which twelve are reverse questions designed for use by an individual referring to himself or herself. The survey I administered to the leadership groups of each

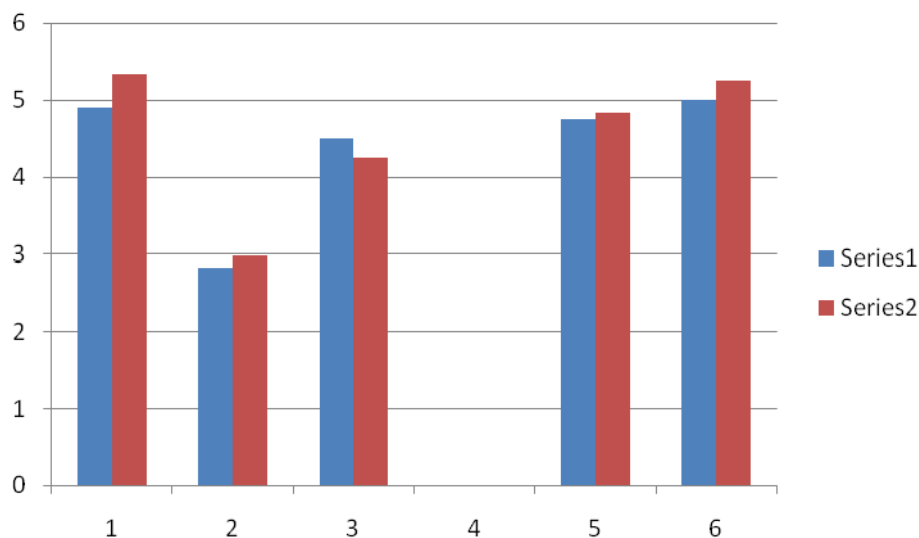
pastor was altered to a third person point of view so leaders could employ the same survey. My Research Reflection Team tallied the results. My team created four categories: (1) *Pastors* (see Figure 4.1)—the average Likert score of individual responses to the eighteen (non-reverse) questions; (2) *Pastors R* (see Figure 4.2)—the average Likert score of individual responses to the twelve reverse questions; (3) *Lay leadership* (see Figure 4.3)—the average Likert score of all leadership responses to the eighteen (non-reverse) questions; and, 4) *Lay leadership R* (see Figure 4.4)—average Likert score of all leadership responses to the twelve reverse questions. Finally, Table 4.1 represents the number of lay leaders who participated in the pastors' surveys.



The vertical axis is the average Likert scale score of individual pastors.
The horizontal axis numbers refer to individual pastors in the study.

The blue (left) columns represent the pretest results.
The red (right) columns represent the posttest results.

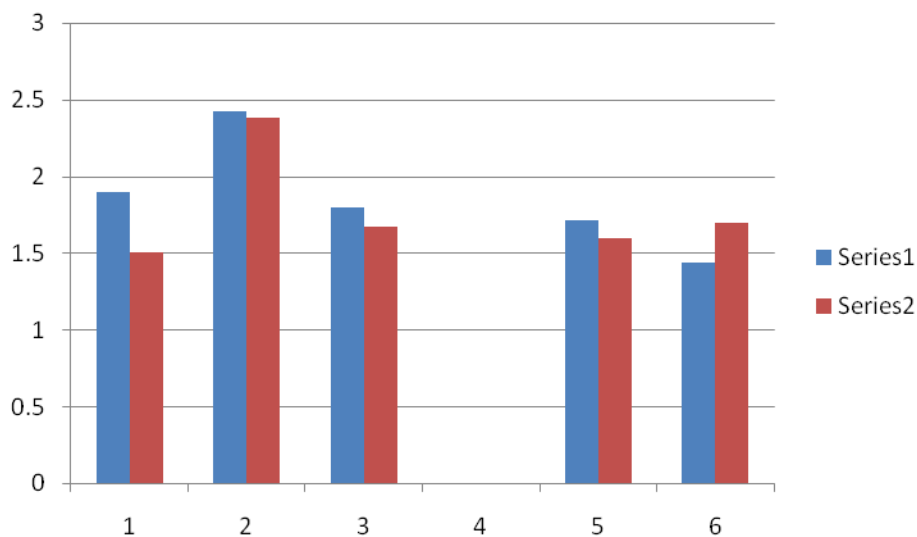
Figure 4.1. Pastors' survey scores on non-reverse questions.



The vertical axis is the average Likert scale score of individual pastors.
The horizontal axis numbers refer to individual pastors in the study.

The blue (left) columns represent the pretest results.
The red (right) columns represent the posttest results.

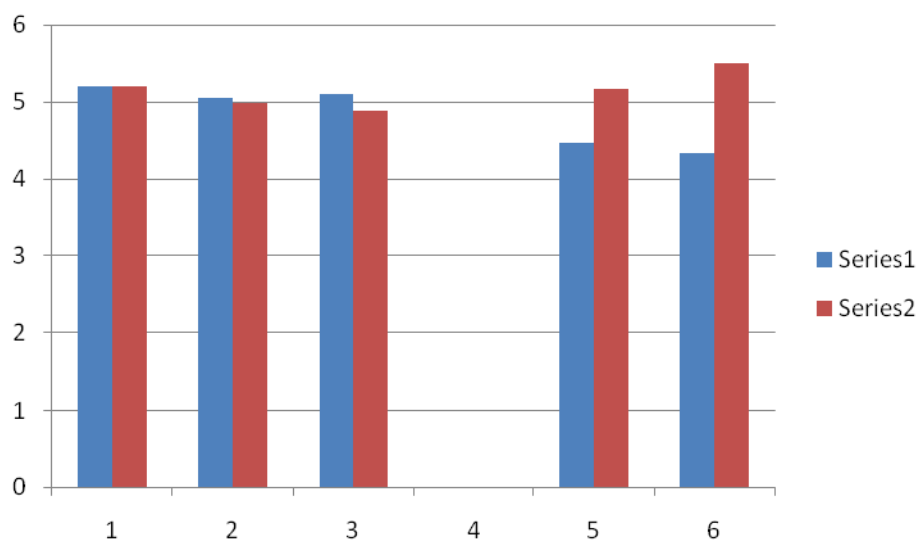
Figure 4.2. Pastors' (R) survey scores on reverse questions.



The vertical axis is the average Likert scale score of individual pastors according to their lay leaders.
The horizontal axis numbers refer to individual pastors in the study.

The blue (left) columns represent the pretest results.
The red (right) columns represent the posttest results.

Figure 4.3. Lay leadership's survey scores on non-reverse questions.



The vertical axis is the average Likert scale score of individual pastors according to their lay leaders. The horizontal axis numbers refer to individual pastors in the study.

The blue (left) columns represent the pretest results.
The red (right) columns represent the posttest results.

Figure 4.4. Lay leadership's (R) survey scores of reverse questions.

Table 4.1. Lay Leadership Survey Participation.

Pastor	Lay Leaders #
Pastor #1	12
Pastor #2	14
Pastor #3	9
Pastor #5	12
Pastor #6	12
Total	47

None of the survey results were statistically significant ($t \leq .05$), yet a majority of the survey results trended upward. Still, the limitations in this study were many: (1) Pastors and leaders relied solely on their short and long-term memories; (2) incremental

changes in a person's spiritual growth are difficult if not impossible to identify; and, (3) pinpointing any specific source of spiritual growth is vague at best. In addition to these limitations, the participant pastors (1) enjoyed our time together (2) wanted to help me and (3) used the survey to affirm our study was worthwhile. In other words, they may have answered the survey questions in order to help my project seem more relevant.

The strongest positive statement I received in terms of spiritual growth as a result of this pastors' study group came from Pastor #3 who said, "This was a definite boost to my spiritual life." The strongest negative statement I received was from Pastor #5 who said, "The project didn't produce spiritual growth. In fact, this exercise would never get us there." The other comments landed between the previous comments and were similar with one another in tone and nature:

"There's no way to quantify the kind of growth we experienced through this group."

"Years instead of months would have produced marked growth."

"Any time with these guys is a victory for me."

"The broad reading was healthy and helped me back into reading on a regular basis."

"The overall impact is yet to be seen—the reading did challenge my thinking."

"Serious Christian writings stir my mind." The Pastors' Study Group produced some higher thinking and deeper sharing of life.

A theme of the overall comments is time. Relationships take time; however, once those relationships are formed the result can be significant conversations not possible otherwise. Pastor #4 noted, "We rarely take the time we need to recharge ourselves."

Clearly his sense of the word “recharged” was not the same as spiritual growth.

My leadership and friendship played a major role in recruiting for the project. One pastor blantly explained he took part in the study because of me. Another pastor acknowledged the noble reason for beginning (the study of classic theology), but admitted he participated because of his friendship with me.

These mid-test paragraphs and posttest interviews provided the best information and feedback in a qualitative way. Nevertheless, the limitations included relying on our own short and long-term memories, identifying incremental changes in our own spiritual growth, and pinpointing the source of our spiritual growth. I had hoped the pastors’ journals would help in recognizing spiritual growth in the individual pastors; however, because none of the pastors journaled, the study does not have any ongoing information about their experience. The kind of investment needed to allow for spiritual growth as a result of a group such as this one would require either several years or several hours per week. As I stated from the beginning of this chapter, neither time frame (weekly meetings or multiple-year commitments) was manageable within the lives of busy, passionate pastors. Therefore, we made the most of our pastors’ study group experience within the boundaries of the time we had available to us.

Because less than half the pastors involved experienced significant change, I can deduce the project did not deliver an innovative new approach to pastoral ministry and their spiritual growth.

Research Question #2

According to the submitted mid-test paragraphs and posttest interviews, what elements of pastors’ lives, ministries and attitudes have kept them from engaging in this

form of reading and discussion prior to this experience?

Christians all have an account of some wonderful ministry group where the Spirit is flowing, lives are being changed, and friendships are blossoming. I have come to hear such reports with both curiosity and cynicism. On the one hand, I love to hear scenarios of faithful ministries and hope to learn from them, but I know such groups (at least the ones that last more than six months) are rare. Christians hear the stories and determine to get a group of their own together. Being part of a caring community of Christian friends sounds easy, but finding the right mix of individuals is difficult.

From my experience with this project and this study group, I discovered each of these pastors share basically my same perspective on study groups. None of us has time to waste, so if we are going to invest the time to be part of a study group, the group experience is going to have to be good. Three of us among the group remember our monthly district ministers' meetings from several years back. At these meetings, active and retired clergy among the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) from our district would gather for lunch and open discussion. With no agenda for the meetings, the big talkers in the group would rehearse wonderful, old stories from the good old days. After an hour, the active clergy in the room began to look for a discreet way out. The saddest moments in the meetings occurred when the retired ministers would offer to help the active ministers with advice. Because the active ministers were pressed for time and did not care to sit through another fifteen-minute story, rarely would we raise any issues or questions. The retired clergy would be highly insulted by the perceived hubris of the active clergy and would occasionally give them a lecture on humility. Therefore, whenever anyone is recruiting participants for a study group, everyone wants to know

the names of the other participants. At the surface, this sad scenario seems to illuminate arrogant attitudes by the younger pastors, but the question is, “what elements of pastors’ lives, ministries, and attitudes have kept them from engaging in this form of reading and discussion prior to this experience?” Part of the answer for active clergy is bad experiences in the not too distant past. One retired pastor who loves the sound of his voice a little too much can chase away a room full of active pastors. Who is in the group is a crucial element to the success of any study for non-retired clergy.

Another significant and problematic attitude standing in the way of pastors’ participation in a study group is the super pastor mind-set. These pastors believe they are the only ones who can do ministry correctly. They must attend every meeting, make every pastoral call, and micromanage every aspect of their congregation’s ministry. These pastors truly cannot take time away from what they perceive to be God’s work to sit idly and talk with ordinary pastors. Pastors of this mind-set cannot be convinced otherwise. In a moment of collegial compassion, they may write down the date and time in case their schedule is free at that time; however, they will not show up. If they do, they will not stay long before a text message pulls them away from the meeting.

The mixture of family life and ministry is another road block to participation in any study group. Pastors know how many hours are in a week, and every hour given in one area of ministry is an hour not given to another area. Sunday is always right around the corner: The sermon and the bulletin (service order) need attention as soon as possible. Ultimately, any time not given to preparation for Sunday usually ends up being subtracted from the family. As a group, the pastors of this study bemoaned the fractured weekends of pastors’ families. If pastors have children in school Monday through

Friday, the weekend schedule does not permit time to get away for a weekend camping trip, a visit to see grandparents, or an out-of-town ball game or wedding. The benefit to the pastors' schedule is a weekday off with no other distractions while the children and spouses may be out of the house. Still, family ranked high for each of the pastors in this project and anything even remotely threatening their precious family time could be easily dismissed.

The elements of a study group that make participation worthwhile are several. First, certainly the promise of learning must be present. Without substance to the study, pastors are not continually going to carve out time to participate. Second, similarly, an equal sharing among pastors whom the participants know and like is essential. If anyone begins to dominate the discussion or regularly gives off a needy ("woe is me") attitude, attendance among the other pastors will drop quickly. Third, too rigid an agenda will not meet the needs of many pastors. Flexibility to discuss a timely issue even though the issue has nothing to do with the scheduled topic of the day is important, yet balance is key, too. The group must be reasonably flexible without abandoning their study. Fourth, meetings must be time sensitive. If ninety minutes is the agreed upon time, pastors need to be free to go after that time period without guilt. Respecting any busy person's time is common courtesy and good leadership. Fifth, pastors will expect to come away from nearly every meeting with some new, great idea for ministry or for preaching. The group is not designed to meet these needs specifically, but several of the pastors in this study conceded that they often judged the value of any pastors' gathering by whether or not they came away with a sermon idea. Desperately gathering sermon ideas is not the purest motive for study, but it is a very real need for all preaching pastors. Pastors agree the

experience alone had value but coming away with something concrete gives a legitimizing effect to the time invested.

The question of work load is another key element to pastors' participation. While I was pleased with and surprised by the success I had in recruiting the five other participants, they signed on immediately because they trusted me, knowing I would not be overzealous in my expectations of them. Each pastor was different. Several considered their minimum requirement to be completion of the reading and attendance at the meetings except in the case of emergency (pastoral or family). One considered the minimum requirement to be showing up for the meetings when possible. We all knew I had a separate agenda for our study group. The dissertation project part of the study group never became uncomfortable, but at times I struggled to keep the group on task. The lowest moments of our interaction were the times I had to ask them to do work outside the reading and meetings such as administering the surveys to their leadership teams. The surveys required them to take time away from their leadership to deal with my issues rather than their own. I could tell some of them (pastors and leaders) mildly resented the requirement.

Finally, from the interviews and my own observations, one last element in pastors' lives that kept them from participating was the wisdom to know that real change (spiritual growth) is a process and six months is only going to get them started. We all knew going into the study a minimal investment of six months, six meetings, five books, and nine hours was not going to create any significant life change. If pastors could not see this study group as another mile walked together on the journey of spiritual development, then they may have chosen to decline the invitation in the hopes of being

available for some other more far-reaching experience.

God can change any person in an instant, yet the more likely scenario is God transforming individuals over a lifetime. The lesson of this study is that quick-fix solutions are rarely the answer to our ongoing need for growth and challenge. Change is enabled with every step along life's journey. My project makes the case for regular monthly meetings, plus ten to fifteen full days scattered throughout each year for a period of three years as a model for measurable, noticeable, and specific life change.

Research Question #3

What are some critical needs in pastors' spiritual growth process best satisfied by pastoral colleagues? Several commented on the difficulty in generating substantial spiritual and/or theological discussions with anyone. Surprisingly, the group realized generating substantial spiritual discussions were difficult even among pastors and colleagues whom each consider friends. Manhood contributes to the difficulty. Men do not naturally talk about emotions or deep thoughts of their hearts, souls, and minds. Men talk about safe subjects—work (in our case the work of ministry but not the substance of ministry), sports, and weather. At the beginning of one of our meetings, after a particularly difficult reading, one pastor suggested next year's pastors' study group meet to play golf once a month instead of read and discuss books. His suggestion was appreciated, and while playing golf rather than reading and discussing classic theology did sound intriguing, each of us knew the group would not last without the purpose and legitimization of a program of study. Relatedly, one pastor was continually frustrated by what he considered to be a quick departure from the author's thoughts only to jump into our own experiences and the practical aspects of ministry. We agreed the value of our

time together would have gone down sharply without the readings. Conversations based (even ever so lightly) on the reading were far better than conversations about the latest with our various congregations and ministries. Still, one pastor summed our experience up nicely when he said, “There is no downside to what we’ve been doing.”

Another interesting dynamic within our experience came to light by one pastor’s insistence that some of the reading was not worthwhile. Another pastor, frankly the pastor least likely to do the reading, fired back saying he does not do anything that does not benefit his ministry. The implication here is the second pastor found our pastors’ study group beneficial to his ministry despite the worthiness of the readings. We found value in the readings despite ourselves; conversely, we found value in our meetings despite the readings. The discipline to read more deeply the nonpractical thoughts of theologians forced us to get out of our administrative roles and consider the hand of God in our midst.

Pastors are often isolated from others. Sometimes we are isolated because of our own doing; other times we are isolated because of the nature of our work. The highpoint of our study group came one day when we realized to a great degree the common struggles we shared as pastors. I do not recall the nature of the discussion leading up to our revelation, but the realization was powerful and helpful. Several times that day, pastors commented on the irony they felt in somehow receiving encouragement from another pastor’s struggles. “Only pastors understand what it’s like to be a pastor.” Admittedly, we abandoned the reading at this point to commiserate on some levels yet to connect with one another significantly. At the close of our six months, this meeting proved to be the climax. We fully moved from collegiality to friendship. At my final

Research Reflection Team meeting, we discussed each of the verbatims from my interviews with the pastors. I was surprised at the dismay of my laypeople when they read “only pastors understand what it’s like to be a pastor.” This quote was unacceptable to my Research Reflection Team, as they refused to believe pastors’ lives were truly different than everyone else’s. Ultimately, we can find no peace here. Pastors agree completely and resonate deeply with the idea that their lives are different, while the laity refuse to believe pastors are so different. The juxtaposition represented here is made up mostly of semantics. Pastors do not think their lives are so different that no one else can (is smart enough to) relate to them. Conversely, the laity cannot fully comprehend how pastors’ callings set them apart.

Research Question #4

What is the value of the shared learning in an ongoing reading and discussion group made up of pastoral colleagues? The concept of shared learning is proclaimed in Scripture: “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work” (Eccles. 4:9). Two or more people working together accomplish more than each would have accomplished alone adding their individual work together. Within community, each person contributes, plus the relationship itself, the group, contributes as an additional, separate participant. The people of God, the Church, and pastors are ripe for creating synergy in all they do.

Pastors are well aware of their need to read in such a way as to stay informed with current thoughts, to learn from great minds of history, and to stir their own thinking. The end result is better, more knowledgeable, and faithful pastors. By reading and discussing together, the value of their reading experience increases significantly as more hearts,

minds, and souls are engaged in processing the ideas and words. At a minimal level, shared learning happens between author and reader as ideas are shared in one direction.

As a reading group, our pastors' study group was heavy on the discussion group elements and light on reading group elements. While each of the pastors did the reading (or at least gleaned the major concepts), the readings occupied only the first few minutes of discussion. The readings did serve as a springboard for discussion though only sparsely referring back to the text once the discussion began. In my posttest interviews, I heard only minor concern over our lack of focus on the readings. One participant suggested the discussion facilitator have a stronger role in bringing us back to the reading material throughout the discussion. Again from the posttest interviews, I gleaned we had informally concluded we were wanting more relationship and less structure, while acknowledging the group would die quickly if not for some theological substance. The readings were helpful but were not the glue that held us together. As the group grew together, we realized the titles and authors were helpful yet somewhat inconsequential. At the lowest level, the reading gave the group and time investment legitimacy in our own minds. At the highest level, the readings stirred new thoughts within us. The pastors from this group are busy people because of their passion for ministry. Of course, some pastors have an unhealthy understanding of the value of meeting, sharing, discussing with colleagues as if that sharing in itself is not important to their ministries and God's kingdom. While we did not discuss the value of our meetings, our consistent attendance confirms our understanding of the meetings' value.

The titles and authors did not seem to matter to the group. In fact, our favorite was one of today's contemporary writers. Still, including some classic theologians' writings

did force us into some places we would not have gone and thoughts we would not have had otherwise. The disciplined approach and formal nature of this group also compelled the pastors to fit the reading into their busy schedules. By participating in the group, the reading assignments acted on us rather than requiring us to act on the readings. Having expectations placed upon us is a healthy experience particularly for senior pastors who often have complete control of their schedules and readings. I have much to accomplish each week but no one who decides my schedule for me.

I was surprised to learn from the group that the favorite reading was *Generous Orthodoxy* by McLaren, a contemporary author. The group offered a variety of thoughts as to why they related most to and got the most out of McLaren. The preference may have been simply a manifestation of a comfort level with contemporary works. McLaren's book was printed in an easy-to-read font with subheadings and short chapters. The group liked the ease of reading McLaren after struggling through Pascal and Buechner. Perhaps pastors, having been out of seminary more than a decade, have grown accustomed to looking singularly for sermons in their reading, and when they do not find preaching material or good illustrations, they subconsciously turn off their minds. Although *Generous Orthodoxy* was the easiest to read, the book offered numerous significant thoughts and ideas. Our discussion over McLaren's book was the best discussion we had in our six months as we held closely to his ideas.

As our time unfolded, I realized what this group of pastors needed most was understanding and challenge in a safe setting among colleagues. Only pastors and pastors' families understand how hard ministry is on families. The pastors in this group have hundreds of other families leaning on them for support and care. Multiple weekly

night- time meetings are a regular occurrence in addition to and often in lieu of children's activities. During school months, pastors' family time is limited in great part to the twenty-four hours from Friday evening through Saturday afternoon (assuming no weddings or funerals are scheduled). Five of the six pastors have a particular day off during the week (the sixth rather nonchalantly takes time as his schedule dictates). Having a day off midweek is wonderful because pastors often can spend it all alone when members of the household are doing other things (e.g., school, work). Unfortunately being alone can also add to pastors' tendency to be loners. The "challenge" element of pastors' needs realizes most healthy pastors in healthy pastorates are not energized by the plethora of materials available for needy and depressed pastors. One of the most enjoyable aspects of this pastors' study group was our love for a challenge. For example, in reading Hauerwas' *Community of Character*, our discussion led us to the topic of accountability. We realized we all needed to be accountable to someone who really knows us, not just the board or pastoral relations committee. Outside of our group setting, several of us came up with a plan to hold one another accountable by asking a few stock questions. The key to this challenge was to have someone in our lives who has permission to speak into our lives particularly when confrontation is needed. Another example came in response to a discussion about preparing ourselves for worship. One of the pastors described his Sunday morning worship preparation routine (taking a long walk early Sunday morning regardless of the weather). Because of this conversation, others are now taking more seriously our worship preparation.

Summary of Major Findings

1. Faithful pastors guard their schedules tightly and, therefore, are unwilling to participate fully in small groups unless the group members are self-selected.
2. Pastors' experiences in ministry create opportunities for growth. Small groups, or in this case a pastor's' study group, offer a place and time for reflection on all God is doing to, in, and for pastors.
3. Balance is what pastors need most. No one element of clergy self-care represents the cure for what ails pastors or for what keeps pastors from fruitful ministry.
4. Qualitative growth is difficult to measure on a short-term basis.
5. Occasionally an event causes Christians to become aware of new growth in themselves or others.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a summary of the problem, procedures, and findings of the project. I have formulated conclusions on the basis of the findings related to the general research questions and limitations of the study and I have made recommendations in light of these conclusions. Some final thoughts complete the presentation of this study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the spiritual growth in six pastors of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Northwest Arkansas, as a result of their participation in a pastors' study group that met for six months to discuss their reading of classic and contemporary theological texts.

Real spiritual growth is the work of God over and above one's own efforts. Christian education involves their being able to better see what God has done, is doing, and will do for them. Pastors respond (and encourage others to respond) in faith. Taking time to reflect on their lives and God's activity in their lives is essential to the Christian education of Christ followers and, ultimately, to their spiritual growth.

Ultimately, the Lord desires pastors not to be intellectuals, orators, preachers, counselors, activists, leaders, or shepherds but to be Christlike persons with love for God's people and a "passion for truth" (Sire 110). Balance in life and ministry is the goal of faithful pastors; a pastors' study group is one of the necessary balancing elements. Pastors' study groups serve pastors in any number of ways, and each group is different in its focus and makeup. I have sought to create a group experience to move pastors forward in their ministries. My denomination, seeing the potential and promise of pastors' study

groups, has attempted to create such groups on regional and district levels, yet with little success for a number of reasons. Foremost among the reasons is the heavy relational element involved in keeping pastors' study groups together. Grouping pastors geographically rarely produces a viable study group. Pastors serving alone in ministry have different needs than those serving on a team of pastors. My research has shown self-selection of group members to be a key element in the success of pastors' study groups.

Pastors need study, prayer, fellowship, friendship, retreats (individual and corporate), conferences, theological stimulation, rest and relaxation, challenge, time off, time to think, accountability, confrontation, laughter, someone to listen to them—anything and everything they can get. Pastors need those things they cannot get in a hurry and may actually feel guilty about having while homebound parishioners go unvisited. Pastors need what is important yet not urgent (Covey 150). Ultimately, pastors need balance in their lives and ministry.

When I began this project, I was sure the missing piece to my ministry's health and faithfulness was regular, ongoing study. I was correct in part, but the broader answer is balance. Discernment is the key to balance because having balance is dynamic; it changes constantly. Christians fool themselves if they think they can create some routine or checklist to achieve and maintain balance. Monitoring themselves (their sinfulness, limitations, hang-ups, and areas of temptation) and being in touch with the Holy Spirit can provide insight into what their minds, souls, bodies and strength need at a particular moment to achieve balance. Jesus was led by the Spirit, so shall they be as Christ's followers.

Study was the one element most glaringly deficient as I began this project, but study alone is not the answer to my longings as a pastor. My project was changed to include colleagues in a pastors' study group. I did not assume being part of the group was the sole answer either. The pastors' study group proved to be another needed element to my overall health and faithfulness. In a pastors' study group, pastors can gain better insight into their own needs individually and the needs of their colleagues, too. In the end, what pastors need is both theological stimulation and renewal of heart, mind, soul, and strength, not one or the other as I was prone to think.

Major Findings

Based on my research, I have come up with four major findings. I address each of the major findings individually in this chapter.

Major Finding #1

Faithful pastors guard their schedules tightly and, therefore, are unwilling to participate fully in small groups unless the group members are self-selected. My second research question asked what elements of pastors' lives, ministries, and attitudes have kept them from engaging in this form of reading and discussion prior to this project.

The ongoing ministry of pastors requires balance most of all. Powers says, "Pastors must realize how essential it is to maintain a healthy balance between intra-dependence (doing) and extra-dependence (being)" (86). Study is one element of balance often passed over by pastors. As was evidenced by my ease of recruiting other pastors to participate in the study, pastors understand the importance of ongoing study and Christian education, yet by experience I know many pastors do not study on a regular basis.

Many factors play into pastors' time. In larger church settings, often pastors are expected to have a broader base of knowledge. Pastors in larger church settings often have many other demands pulling on them, and limiting the amount of time available for study. Only the most forward thinking and well resourced churches will hire additional support staff for the expressed purpose of limiting pastors' other responsibilities so the pastors will have time to study. Conversely, many smaller churches have heavy, relational expectations of their pastors, wanting their pastors to visit the members regularly during crises and otherwise. Plus, in the absence of sufficient office staff, many administrative duties fall upon small church pastors, taking up their valuable time. All pastors who are passionate about their ministry are stretched for time. Therefore, the issue is not availability of time but the ability of pastors to prioritize their schedules effectively to allow for study and an overall balance.

From this project, I learned the reasons why these six pastors were not taking sufficient time to study. The strongest variables included meaningful opportunity, collegial mix, personality type, level of discipline, family responsibilities, and leadership style. Convincing these pastors to be part of the study group was not difficult; maintaining their time commitment was the challenge. The pastors grasped the importance of the opportunity, but understanding the importance of our time together did not make finding time to participate any easier in the midst of other demands.

Ongoing study is essential to effective ministry. Not only will study protect parishioners from the obsessive influence of the minister's own opinions, prejudices, and feelings, but study will also give confidence to pastors entering into further dialogue with their congregations as an extension of the pastors' pulpit ministry (Craddock, *Preaching*

70). Study is work offering little if any immediate fruit, yet study is necessary to keep pastors from stagnating. One aspect of pastors' learning is an accepting atmosphere of sharing in which ideas and questions flow without judgment or criticism. The pastors' study group employed in this project offered a safe and compelling atmosphere for learning.

At first glance pastors may assume the reason they are not investing enough of their time in study is because of time constraints. This project suggests otherwise. True, pastors may need some reminding as to how helpful a study group can be, but overall, the leading factors involved are not time issues as much as the factors are issues of personalities involved and leadership style. As pastor #5 asked, "Why meet with a bunch of pastors I don't know for surface talk, when I can use that time to disciple someone?"

Major Finding #2

Pastors' experiences in ministry create opportunities for growth. Small groups, or in this case a pastors' study group, offer a place and time for reflection on all God is doing to, in, and for pastors. Too often pastors handle their ministries like secular jobs, failing to allow themselves the time to become aware of what God is doing in and around them. As pastors work apart from God's strength and guidance, they become *professionals*. One pastor said, "I realize I have a job to do and occasionally just have to do it, but that should be the exception not the rule. I want to serve not just work."

Research Question #3 sought to unveil that the critical needs of pastors in their spiritual growth process are best satisfied by pastoral colleagues, "[t]hat you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Rom. 1:12).

Each of the participating pastors in my pastors' study group wants to make a difference for God—desiring not to be a super pastor as much as a faithful pastor.

Ministry models two tracks for super pastors. In the first model, pastors work incredible hours without taking breaks or vacations, leaving little time for themselves, their families, their study, and their relationship with God. They literally do everything for many years, then burnout due to a lack of life, friendships, and depth. Passion carries these pastors at first, but eventually their passion gives way to burnout, depression, loneliness, emptiness, spiritual dryness, and temptation—an unfortunate and unnecessary season or ending.

In the second model, passion drives pastors to make a long-term difference for God. These pastors look with scrutiny upon their schedules and activities, keeping a balance in ministry. They have colleagues who are also friends, who are driven to serve God most faithfully, and whose passion calls them to achieve more, touch more lives, and become all God created them to be. They seek out collegial opportunities to grow, learn, and connect.

Today's literature fully covers the plight of pastors—their struggles and needs. Books and seminars everywhere warn of the early signs of burnout—emotional signs such as loneliness, emptiness, and apathy, and health-related signs such as illness, sleeplessness, and lethargy. Overall, pastors are a group of people who are not caring for themselves in significant areas of life and ministry and are, therefore, jeopardizing their ministries due to their lack of discipline and balance. After an initial burst of years in ministry, their focus shifts from effective ministry to survival. Many are the resources focused on *surviving* and *maintaining* found under the categorical heading of *ministry*. Resources focusing on effectiveness, growth, thriving are often labeled *leadership*. I

found this categorization to be telling for the underlying assumption is that very little leadership takes place when the focus of one's ministry is survival. Henri M. Nouwen refutes this assumption by explaining the pastor's role as "wounded healer" (xvi). Pastors who are able to focus their attention outward despite their own struggles and needs are enabled to do great ministry, while pastors who cannot lift their eyes beyond their own hardships cease to do ministry and begin to drain energy out of everyone around them. Nouwen is right: Pastors are not perfect persons. The Apostle Paul writes, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

In many small groups and/or pastors' study groups, discussion is limited to the lowest common denominator—survival. The leadership elements of study, growth, and challenge rarely are the focus except when a group is formed for one or more of these purposes. Because pastors tend to be inclusive, sensitive people, and because pastors are often needy people, the focus of small groups leans toward the pastors in the group who are merely surviving. Speaking of a denominationally organized pastors' group, a pastor from the study said, "Every month we would hear Rev. Smith's gripes about his elders. I decided not to waste my time in that group anymore." Every need is valid in group settings; therefore, to go beyond survival themes, group organizers must decide upon their purpose from the outset and choose participants wisely to ensure the group's effectiveness.

In addition to pastors' needs for ongoing education and training, pastors also need relationships with persons outside their own congregations. Friendship may involve golf or fishing, but the key factor is depth of relationship sustained over time. Pastors need others who have common vision, conviction, and goals, persons with whom the pastors

can be accountable. Ursin uses four words beginning with C to communicate the nature of these pastoral relationships: colleagues, connections, clarification, and confrontation (37). Marion Coger and Carol Pierce later add two more C words: collaborator and clown (56). Doing ministry alone without colleagues and/or without accountability to others is unhealthy. Life and ministry begin to close in on individual pastors who have no outside connections. Soon those pastors give in to stress and loneliness. Pastors need persons who will listen, help clarify issues, ask the right questions, and care enough to confront the pastors about their blind spots or issues they have been avoiding (Ursin 37). Coger and Pierce add collaborators, who help pastors avoid isolation and burnout, and clowns, who give perspective and support through humor when they take themselves or their situations too seriously (56).

Pastors need one another. Today's young people are in constant communication through a variety of electronic means. Unfortunately, these young people are setting themselves up for failure as they are not learning basic communication skills and are essentially alone in an electronic world. In many ways, technology exacerbates pastors' problems for community and connection. Some pastors enter the ministry with inadequate people skills and a loner existence. As online learning is increasingly available and is an ordinary part of ongoing theological education for pastors, its convenience is withdrawing some of the relational elements of the classroom experience, serving only to isolate pastors further. "Continuing theological education is best when it offers a residential experience which pastors are rare to find elsewhere" (Hawkins 170). Late night conversations are not likely in traditional pastoral settings yet are expected at conferences and retreats. "All my best conversations take place face-to-face after 10

p.m.” Ironically, late night conversations are readily available online along with a degree of anonymity. Perhaps the value of online connections can enable a greater depth of sharing because the risk of exposure is decreased. Conferences and retreats have the advantage of inviting persons together for an intensive period of time. Conferences offer relationship-building opportunities to staff and/or ministry teams attending together. Group retreats are beneficial because of their heavy relational elements; connections are made. An annual, private retreat offers time between pastor and Creator but relinquishes the benefits of shared learning among colleagues. Again, each of these opportunities brings something a little different to the delicate balance of a pastor’s heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Pastors are programmed to think the group, the event, or the experience is where the learning is. They are encouraged to read a book, attend a conference, go on a retreat in order to allow God to work in their lives, but God shapes them in their ministry settings more than any other place. Study groups, conferences, even books, allow them to step back, see what God is doing, and open their eyes to what God is doing in their everyday lives and ministries. The growth they experience is the growth they see in their ministry. My original proposal of having a private weekly study time may have allowed for more personal growth in ministry but without the built-in element of group discussion and reflection, thus deepening the dangerous crevasse between myself and others. We assumed growth would happen within the group as a result of the reading and the subsequent time together. We discovered the group enabled us to understand, identify, and appreciate God’s activity in our midst. Without a sense of God’s presence in their lives and ministries, pastors quickly become religious professionals. Though the six

pastors in this project are passionate about ministry, we were helped by a thought by Andy Crouch (189). Crouch explained the kind of long-term lasting influence most pastors will make is local and limited and does not involve huge numbers. Ministry is an act of love in which big numbers, huge changes, and/or high impact is the exception, not the rule. Most often, God works in simple ways. Pastors' ministries, though not always revolutionary, may be the most significant ministries of all.

Major Finding #3

Balance is what pastors need most. No one element of clergy self-care represents the cure for what ails pastors or for what keeps pastors from fruitful ministry. Finding all the ingredients of help, health, and support may not be possible in one setting (Ursin 38). Two elements of self-care are private and group study time; both are important, though private study time is easier to schedule for most pastors. In Research Question #4, I asked about the value of an ongoing reading group made up of pastoral colleagues. "When clergy are motivated together toward an appropriate goal, they become a much more powerful force than each going his own way" (40). One of the participants commented, "Everything about our time together in this is positive. I need time with you guys." I believe God speaks with believers in a variety of ways, most importantly through other people.

In the secular world, the educational trend is toward self-directed learning (Evans 304). Employees desire to be in control of their learning and its direction. In his discussion of how continuing education can serve the church, D. Bruce Roberts lists both the ability to select group members and a program of study as characteristics of a good pastors' study group (Continuing Theological Education 18). Selecting the group

members adds to the likelihood of experiencing shared learning among the participants and, therefore, adds to the likelihood of the group being significant. Two kinds of synergy are possible: “weak synergy”—defined as group performance that exceeds the performance of the average group member when working alone, and “strong synergy”—is group performance that exceeds the solo performance of even the best group member (Larson 415).

Pastors’ study groups allow for a broader approach to leadership development within churches. Once pastors become lead or senior pastors, relatively few programs exist to support their continued development (McKenna and Yost 179). The plethora of seminaries now offering doctoral programs is a response to the need for further education and training. Traditional seminary or licensing training typically comes to an end as the pastor’s ministry begins, and seminary training is, at best, a foundation for later study rather than a complete process (Gamble 10). Another valuable aspect of the pastors’ study group is “on the job” training (187), where real life issues and experiences can be used for continuing education purposes. “Pastors serving churches with more than one pastor have an advantage here, where on the job training occurs daily rather than at a monthly meeting.” Pastors must change their churches’ operational structure to allow for their needed time of interaction, meeting, and study with colleagues (Smith 115):

I argue for a form of Theological Education that is more than a cerebral quest for knowledge and that embodies what we say we believe. I describe a continuing education opportunity called “Covenant Colleagues,” which seek to answer the concerns and cries of clergywomen in their first ten years of ministry as well as challenge them to further their theological study in the years following ordination. (Cook 320)

Pastors and churches serve themselves well when they employ some kind of continuing education in the early years of ministry in the hope continuing education will always be

part of their ministry.

Pastors' study groups serve the purpose of continuing education. Our pastors' study group design was good enough to keep pastors attending the meetings and, for the most part, doing the agreed upon reading. Without the reading, each of us knew we would be left to our own devices, which would turn our discussion on ourselves. "I liked the reading. It gave us something more to talk about than ourselves" (Pastor #4). Having experienced ineffective fellowship groups together in the past, we knew the significance of our study group lay in the reading and subsequent discussion—the grounding of the group outside ourselves.

Without balance, pastors are on a collision course with burnout. Because of the energy and excitement coming from serving God, pastors are easily duped into thinking they will never tire of doing God's work for God will provide the strength they need to press on. Where pastors go wrong in their thinking is in thinking God will provide the energy and resources to do everything the pastor sees as needed. God's ways are not our ways, nor our ways God's (Isa. 55:8). God understands balance—what we really need and what we can physically, spiritually and emotionally do. God will provide for this ministry and no more.

Major Finding #4

Qualitative growth is difficult to measure on a short-term basis. My first Research Question looked at survey results, submitted mid-test paragraphs, and posttest interviews in search of measureable spiritual growth in the pastors over the six-month period. The study demonstrated no measureable change. The study did tell something—qualitative growth is difficult to measure on a short-term basis. Knowing growth is difficult to

measure over a brief period of time, my choices to resolve the problem were (1) to increase the length of the study (three years seemed to be the standard) or (2) to increase the frequency of the study group within the six-month period. The length of my study was limited to six months by the design of the course work; therefore, increasing the intensity of the study was the obvious solution. However, eliciting the kind of investment needed for such a study was problematic. The pastors I invited to participate in the study group were passionate about their ministries and, therefore, already had full and ambitious calendars. Despite the value the five other pastors knew they would get from our study group, they would not have committed to a weekly group meeting. The commitment necessary to gain a weekly investment of time would have introduced a completely new set of complications and limitations. Ultimately, we settled for six meetings over a period of six months.

From the beginning, no one expected miracles to occur in our brief time together. Paul writes, “Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). I believe the “conforming” about which Paul talks, the transformation, the “renewing of your mind,” is to be understood as an ongoing process as opposed to an instantaneous happening or short-term event. Real growth does not happen without a significant investment of time, effort, and reflection. The Apostle Paul experienced conversion on the road to Damascus, then grew in his understanding of the gospel from that day forward. Similarly, too many pastors assume the goal of the Christian life is conversion and baptism. The goal of the Christian life is the development of Christlike character; conversion and baptism are the first steps not the last. Again, pastors find strains of the quick-fix perspective pushing for fast

results when only a long-term investment will accomplish the desired results. True learning is transformational. Their responsibility as Christians (and as leaders of Christians) is to position themselves to receive God's gifts of grace and wisdom. They cannot control every aspect of their learning, but they can intentionally position themselves to learn.

Books, sermons, conferences everywhere tout change and growth available on a short-term basis without much effort. One speaker preached for years about his one day, Lay Ministry Conference—touting an experience that will turn a lay person into a leader by the end of the day. “Have a New Child by Friday” and “Five Easy Steps to Spiritual Growth” are a few titles I have seen. The underlying message of these authors and speakers is misleading Christians to believe significant change can occur in a short time, low commitment scenario. I disagree. “I have a dozen conference workbooks with pages of notes that I’ve never looked back on.” The value of these conferences, messages, and books will be in pastors’ reflection on the author’s and speaker’s thoughts in the days and weeks ahead.

Assuming pastors are obedient to God’s call on their lives, and assuming they have a spiritual vision for their lives, growth is happening. Their lives improve daily as they “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of [us]” (Phil. 3:12b). With faithful study and attention to God’s activity in their lives, their witness, character, and influence get stronger as they age as opposed to weakening their lives, ministries, and reputations due to unfaithfulness, passivity, and irresponsibility (Lewis 4).

Major Finding #5

Occasionally an event brings about a new awareness of growth. I noticed a difference in the responses of one of the lay leader groups between pre- and posttest surveys. The difference was not statistically significant, yet I was surprised by the change. Both pastors from this church participated in the study and, therefore, were the subjects of pre- and posttest surveys by the same group of leaders. In the six months between the pre- and posttest, the senior pastor announced his resignation. In that time, the lay leaders of the church began to see both of their pastors in a new light—both as more significant leaders. The survey values increased for both pastors. The senior pastor was perceived as boldly stepping out in faith to accept a new calling, while the associate pastor was seen as the one stepping up to be the transitional leader.

Implications of Findings

For the six-month period May through November 2007, six pastors joined together in reading and reflecting on some classic Christian thinkers and theologians. As a result of those meetings, the world was not changed, the Church was not changed, but six pastors had their eyes opened to the value of carving out time for thinking and discussing together matters of eternal significance—their own lives and ministries. Ministry does not always change pastors for the good, often ministry changes from a spiritual adventure to a professional challenge (Hagemeyer 167). Pastors struggle to keep in touch with their God-given passion in serving and handle all the demands and responsibilities of a pastorate.

The six pastors had their eyes opened to see that over the years pastors have lost something—the innocence and purity of a pastoral ministry of study, preaching, and

service. Gone are the days when the pastor was the most educated person in the community and was expected to keep up a regular study regimen. Gone are the days when a pastor's singular focus was study and preparation for Sunday's message. Today, pastors have administrative and leadership responsibilities consuming the vast majority of their work week. I enjoy the challenge of ministry today with its additional responsibilities and believe these other demands have forever changed the skill set and the type of person needed to do ministry. Though my skills and personality fit today's ministry, I doubt the skill set I possess would match the ministry demands of previous generations.

Still, pastors have lost much in forfeiting the person of God imagery in order to become CEOs of their churches. Pastors used to spend their time studying the Bible and reading classic texts. Today, pastors read secular books and blogs on leadership and business management (though not exclusively) to their advantage and to their detriment. Pastors have lost the time to deal with the needs of people all around them.

My Research Reflection Team refused to concede that pastors have an inordinate number of needy people in their lives. A Reflection Team member commented, "We all have needy people in our lives." For me, the needs of people I hardly know are what can most quickly burn me out. Pastors' hearts and schedules are appropriately more susceptible to needy people. Pastors' names are on signs, marquees and printed materials. Pastors' faces are on television. They have name badges to wear at hospitals. They are the ones called upon to speak and to stand up front. Pastors get calls from virtually anyone they know (family, neighbors, acquaintances, and church family), plus the extended church family, and people they do not even know calling from morgues, police

stations, bus stations, emergency rooms, and prisons. If ever pastors had time to deal adequately with such needs, that time is gone.

Many pastors have surrendered of their own volition their time for reflection and creativity. This time is not lost to generational or cultural changes but simply hiding among the multitude of responsibilities placed on pastors today.

Despite all Christians have lost, they have also gained an active church whose people are trying to meet the needs of people everywhere in every difficult situation life presents. They have gained the wisdom of both the research and business communities' best thoughts and filtered those thoughts through their own lenses. They have gained a new generation of pastors who desperately want to serve the God they love in the twenty-first century.

Robert Lewis, who created a popular men's ministry curriculum, has his finger on the pulse of men. Lewis contends every man must work at having close friendships with other men, so men will have someone who can speak truth to them. Without deep, trusting friendships, men lack accountability and are ripe for temptations of every kind (4). Pastors need someone who can confront their sin; otherwise, pastors become an island to themselves separate from the church family and Christian community. Pastors are wise to make the most of the collegial relationships they already have (Hagemeyer 169) and build on those friendships. If balance is our goal, pastors will need colleagues to help them stay the course long-term.

Limitations of the Study

The size of the group numbered six pastors. The study limited the total time of our interaction as a pastors' study group to nine hours over a six-month period. An expanded

time period of meeting together would have given opportunity to explore further the possibilities of our study group. Outcomes from an expanded time period would most certainly be more focused and instructive.

At the first meeting of the pastors' study group, we decided which books we would read and discuss. Obviously, another group would chose a different set of readings; however, I do not think altering the readings would have a noticeable effect on the study overall.

Our discussion times were very informal with a designated facilitator yet without any expectations from the group for the facilitator to teach or present the material from the reading. A broader covering of each book (and potentially a deeper discussion) may have been possible had we asked each facilitator to provide an overview. The participants included only male pastors between the ages of 37 to 47 from Arkansas; thus, gender, generational and geographical limitations existed within the group. Age and/or season of life factored heavily into my findings; pastors outside this general age range (younger or older) have different needs compared to these participants. Two of the six participating pastors serve as the only ordained pastor at their respective congregations. Pastors serving in solo situations often need the interaction with colleagues that pastors serving in multiple staff congregations have daily. One pastor posited, "I was the convener of a district ministers' meeting recently and made the mistake of going around the room having the pastors report how they were doing. Some guys talked for fifteen minutes! I later realized they had no one else to talk to." Each pastor involved in this study is an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination, resulting in

a lack of ecumenical diversity. The six-month interval between the two tests gave time for other events to affect participating pastors positively or negatively.

Serendipitous Observations

Through my participation in this project, I discovered some surprisingly guilty feelings within me concerning my use of time. Reflecting upon my feelings, I realized I needed to justify my time only to myself—no outside entity was questioning my schedule. I felt free to invest my time in others areas of ministry but not in study. “Stealing off” to study, read and think when I know shut-ins have not been visited, phone calls have not been made, and the next quarter of worship services need to be planned stirred up feelings of guilt. I wrestled with my feelings, questioning whether or not my motives were pure. Somehow, I had the sense I should do my reading, studying, and thinking on my own time not during the work day. I have come to the conclusion that my feelings are short-sighted especially in the light of my project. Without a consistent time of intentional study, my ministry begins to lose purpose. My heart, mind, soul, and strength begin to dry up quickly, and I become a professional church leader rather than a pastor of people. “I do not apologize to my congregation or board for taking time to think, to wait for thoughts to come, or to seek adequate rest” (Hagemeyer 171). Jesus regularly took time away to pray and be alone; he also spent many hours a day with his disciples. I will always have other papers to push and prayers to be prayed. Balancing all my responsibilities as a pastor, husband, and father is crucial to my faithfulness in each area. Hybels teaches pastors to establish a “finish line” (*Axiom 169*). For him, after ten hours of work, he is finished for the day. Ministry can be constant if pastors allow it to be. Their ministries will only be productive a small portion of each week, so they must

establish their own finish lines in order to “run in such a way as to win the prize” (1 Cor. 9:24).

Throughout my doctoral studies, I have had a constant, unified chorus of parishioners commenting on the spiritual growth they have seen in me. Although this portion of the project was never officially measured, the comments of the congregation speak loudly to support as pastor’s program of regular, ongoing study.

Finally, having worked through this pastors’ study group process with clergy, I wonder how a similar model would work with laity in a small group setting. I know many people who long for deeper thoughts about God and their faith. This model is not for everyone, but believers are shortsighted when they assume laity does not want to invest time in study and group reflection about God.

Recommendations

In light of this project and my findings, I would recommend all pastors come up with their own annual (or biannual) plan for ongoing study. The plans should include among other elements, conferences, retreats (private and corporate), study groups, and individual study with a diverse reading agenda. Pastors should communicate their plans and the reasoning behind their plans to their congregation’s governing body in order to gain the congregation’s approval and the necessary funding and/or time away.

Denominational entities wanting to encourage their pastors to be part of study groups will want to provide their pastors with resources (curricula, materials, sample group outlines, funding, travel and housing). Allowing pastors to self-select their own groups and decide upon the nature of their group is also essential. For those pastors who

are unable to generate a group of their own, denominational leadership can provide networking opportunities.

Reflecting on clergy's collision course with burnout, I recommend pastors lay out a weekly plan for their work. By dividing each day into three broad periods (morning, afternoon, and evening, each period being roughly three to four hours), pastors should identify eleven to twelve periods per week for them to carry out their ministry (one of those periods being reserved for study). By keeping to their schedule, pastors will have appropriate time to do the work of ministry while having time for study, life, love, and learning.

Future Studies

I can imagine numerous studies being spawned from this one. The six-month limitation on this project severely hampered the outcomes of any quantitative data. While the beginnings of spiritual growth and life change were not measureable in six months, the possibility for spiritual growth and life change was evident. A study over a longer period of time (i.e., three years) would allow for better data and learning.

The pastors' study group in this project met monthly for ninety minutes over a six-month period, a total of nine hours over half a year. Further study is needed to discern the effectiveness of a monthly group as compared to a pastors' retreat setting where pastors gather for a full day or overnight experience on an annual or semi-annual basis. Would either experience (monthly or annual) prove to be more effective in creating shared learning for their ministries as they press on?

In jest, one of the participating pastors suggested the pastors' study group continue for another six months with the following change: Rather than meeting in a

church classroom to discuss classic readings, we meet on the golf course for fellowship and fun. The group was quick to dismiss the idea, citing the need for a greater purpose than fellowship and fun. Nevertheless, such a study would help define exactly what pastors need from one another. I have had seasons in my life and ministry when friendship (fellowship) and fun are what I needed most.

With the limitations of this project being six months, a further study could determine whether or not individual pastors can elicit the kind of investment from their colleagues to create measureable growth in only six months. Originally, I had hoped to spend a morning a week in individual study measuring the outcomes of my efforts and time. If a group of pastors were to commit to a morning a week, would the outcomes be measureable and statistically significant?

Additional research could be focused on pastors who download their sermons from the Web each week. What, if any, are the long-term effects on the pastors themselves and/or the congregations they serve? Can the lack of sermon preparation and the forfeiture of the incarnational Spirit be overcome by excellence in other areas of ministry?

I did not include sabbaticals in my research. What is the relationship of sabbaticals to pastors' balance and health in ministry?

An individual's personality affects him or her in many ways. I have administered personality tests to my staff regularly in each of my ministry settings in order to understand my staff better. I would be interested in research on personality types in relation to time spent in study. Do introverts naturally spend more time in study? Are extroverts more likely to be part of study groups because they enjoy being around other

people?

Finally, further study is warranted to see if pastors' study groups will be effective with laity as well. The comparison would focus on the challenges of pastors versus the challenges facing non-clergy Christians seeking to serve the God they love.

Final Thoughts

The best kind of learning is nonutilitarian. Once people put parameters on their learning, then they figure out what is the least amount they have to do to meet the requirements. Learning for the sake of learning is best—more depth, no pressure, no agenda other than being present.

As my mentor, Dr. Michael Pasquarello likes to say, “The goal of the Christian life is God. To try to make God useful messes the process up.” God is not an object people use. Faith is not utilitarian; it works through love. The only payoff in following and worshiping God is God himself. God values people because they are made in his image, and God is good and God is love. Learning and growing in Christ is located within nonutilitarian bounds. Transforming Christians is not the goal of their study, but the fruit of their study.

Within a group of trusted colleagues is certainly one of the best places to work and talk through God's vision for a pastor's life. Pastors cannot underestimate the importance of relationships in sustaining and restoring their spiritual passion.

Pastors are blessed by being called to invest their lives in serving the Almighty God as opposed to the almighty dollar. “I love doing what I do. I can't imagine working as hard as I do for profit's sake. I get to work for God, not just to make money.” Pastors get to invest time in relationships that challenge, strengthen, and encourage them. Most

workplaces do not allow time for introspection. Ministry does. Pastors must take the time to reflect on their lives and ministry. Unlike many other professions, pastors do not have the luxury of showing up for work with unresolved sin in their lives. Representing God in ministry means surrendering themselves to God's desire and purifying them in whatever way possible to be a worthy vessel:

Not that I have already obtained all this or have been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12-14)

Pastors can experience new depth of faithfulness, life, and service by investing themselves in a pastors' study group.

APPENDIX A

PRE- AND POSTTEST PASTOR SURVEY

Spiritual Maturity Index—Pastor

Instructions: Please circle the choice that best indicates the extent of your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. *Please note that there is no “right” response*; your response should honestly describe your personal experience. Do not choose an answer that would make you look “spiritual” if it is not true of yourself. All responses will be confidential; please do not put your name on the questionnaire.

1 – strongly agree

2 – agree

3 – moderately agree

4 – moderately disagree

5 – disagree

6 – strongly disagree

1. My faith doesn't primarily depend on the formal church for its vitality.
2. The way I do things from day to day is often affected by my relationship with God.
3. I seldom find myself thinking about God and spiritual matters during each day. (R).
4. Even if the people around me opposed my Christian convictions, I would still hold fast to them.
5. The encouragement and example of other Christians is essential for me to keep on living for Jesus. (R).
6. I feel like I need to be open to consider new insights and truths about my faith.
7. I am convinced that the way I believe spiritually is the right way.
8. People that don't believe the way that I do about spiritual truths are hard-hearted. (R).
9. I feel that a Christian needs to take care of his or her own needs first in order to help others. (R).
10. My faith doesn't seem to give me a definite purpose in my daily life. (R).
11. I find that following Christ's example of sacrificial love is one of my most important goals.
12. My identity (who I am) is determined more by my personal or professional situation than by my relationship with God. (R).
13. Walking closely with God is the greatest joy in my life.
14. I feel that identifying and using my spiritual gifts is not really important. (R).
15. I don't seem to be able to live in such a way that my life is characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. (R).
16. When my life is done, I feel like only those things that I've done as part of following Christ will matter.
17. I believe that God has used the most “negative” of difficult times in my life to draw me closer to Him.
18. I feel like God has let me down in some of the things that have happened to me. (R).

19. I have chosen to forego various gains when they have detracted from my spiritual witness or violated spiritual principles.
20. Giving myself to God regardless of what happens to me is my highest calling in life.
21. I don't regularly study the Bible in-depth on my own. (R).
22. I actively look for opportunities to share my faith with non-Christians.
23. My relationships with others are guided by my desire to express the love of Christ.
24. I don't regularly have times of deep communion with God in personal (private) prayer (R).
25. More than anything else in life I want to know God intimately and to serve Him.
26. Worship and fellowship with other believers is a significant part of my Christian life.
27. It seems like I am experiencing more of God's presence in my daily life than I have previously.
28. I feel like I am becoming more Christlike.
29. I seem to have less consistent victories over temptation than I used to. (R).
30. On the whole, my relationship with God is alive and growing.

(R)- reversed-scored item.

APPENDIX B

POSTTEST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Overall, what did you think of our experience? Was it worth your time?
- 2) What value did you gain?
- 3) What was the least valuable aspect?
- 4) Would you continue? Why/why not?
- 5) How would you improve on this experience (make it more effective)?
- 6) On a scale from 1-6 (1 being “strongly agree”; 6 being “strongly disagree”), rate the following statements:
 - a) I have a need to meet with ministry colleagues regularly.
 - b) I read extensively prior to this reading group.
 - c) My ministry/congregation benefited from my participation in this group.
 - d) My life benefited from my participation in this group.

APPENDIX C

PRE- AND POSTTEST LEADER SURVEY

Spiritual Maturity Index—Leader

Instructions: Please circle the choice that best indicates the extent of your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. *Please note that there is no “right” response*; your response should honestly describe your personal experience. Do not choose an answer that would make your pastor look “spiritual” if it is not true. All responses will be confidential; please do not put your name on the questionnaire.

1 – strongly agree

2 – agree

3 – moderately agree

4 – moderately disagree

5 – disagree

6 – strongly disagree

1. His faith doesn't primarily depend on the formal church for its vitality.
2. The way he does things from day to day is often affected by his relationship with God.
3. He seldom finds himself thinking about God and spiritual matters during each day. (R).
4. Even if the people around him opposed his Christian convictions, he would still hold fast to them.
5. The encouragement and example of other Christians is essential for him to keep on living for Jesus. (R).
6. He feels like he needs to be open to consider new insights and truths about his faith.
7. He is convinced that the way he believes spiritually is the right way.
8. People that don't believe the way that he does about spiritual truths are hard-hearted. (R).
9. He feels that a Christian needs to take care of his or her own needs first in order to help others. (R).
10. His faith doesn't seem to give him a definite purpose in his daily life. (R).
11. He finds that following Christ's example of sacrificial love is one of his most important goals.
12. His identity (who he is) is determined more by his personal or professional situation than by his relationship with God. (R).
13. Walking closely with God is the greatest joy in his life.
14. He feels that identifying and using his spiritual gifts is not really important. (R).
15. He doesn't seem to be able to live in such a way that his life is characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. (R).
16. When his life is done, he feels like only those things that he's done as part of following Christ will matter.
17. He believes that God has used the most “negative” or difficult times in his life to draw him closer to God.

18. He feels like God has let him down in some of the things that have happened to him. (R).
19. He has chosen to forego various gains when they have detracted from his spiritual witness or violated spiritual principles.
20. Giving himself to God regardless of what happens to him is his highest calling in life.
21. He doesn't regularly study the Bible in-depth on his own. (R).
22. He actively looks for opportunities to share his faith with non-Christians.
23. His relationships with others are guided by his desire to express the love of Christ.
24. He doesn't regularly have times of deep communion with God in personal (private) prayer (R).
25. More than anything else in life he wants to know God intimately and to serve Him.
26. Worship and fellowship with other believers is a significant part of his Christian life.
27. It seems like he is experiencing more of God's presence in his daily life than he has previously.
28. He feels like he is becoming more Christlike.
29. He seems to have less consistent victories over temptation than he used to. (R).
30. On the whole, his relationship with God is alive and growing.

(R)- reversed-scored item.

APPENDIX D

VERBATIMS

Pastor #1

November 15, 2007

C: Overall, what did you think of our experience? Was it worth your time?

1: I am very intentional about reading but not this kind of reading. The collegiality was excellent. I heard some of the guys talking about continuing on but instead of meeting in Sunday school classrooms over books, we could just meet and play golf instead. If it were golf, it would be too easy to skip, and we'd lose the value of it all.

C: What value did you gain?

1: Hearing everyone's differing perspectives on the readings. I received an unexpected affirmation of our common struggles. Their stuff is tough, too. Oddly, I found it all to be encouraging—knowing we have these common struggles. I got new ideas for dealing with issues.

C: What was the least valuable aspect?

1: Hmmmm. Well, I'd have to say reading from classic theologians wasn't all that great. Overall, I agree it was healthy for us to read some of that stuff. I prefer and would have preferred to read with this group, stuff that is more where the rubber hits

the road. I guess we ended up there anyway. The practical parts were more helpful than the classics.

C: Would you continue? Why/why not?

1: Yes, I would continue. There's really no way to quantify the kind of growth we experienced through this reading group. If there were a way, it would have showed up because this was good for us all. There was no downside to what we've been doing. We built relationships with other colleagues and were challenged intellectually—it was all healthy.

C: How would you improve on this experience (make it more effective)?

1: The questionnaires didn't seem to fit with what we were doing. The questionnaires you had us give to our church leadership were particularly odd. Many of those questions were not ones that the average elder could answer about me.

C: I agree. When we started out, the ability to measure spiritual growth seemed to be the most important part of my research. Turns out, the growth came pretty much in immeasurable ways.

1: I also think it would have been more effective if it could have been longer term. If our group were not tied to academics, we could choose more broadly from books, authors, and subjects, which would have made it more interesting. Our spiritual growth would have showed up had we been able to do this long-term.

C: On a scale from 1-6 (1 being “strongly agree”; 6 being “strongly disagree”), rate the following statements:

a) I have a need to meet with ministry colleagues regularly.

1: One, but not just with anybody. The group has to be made up of guys I can connect with. We've tried being part of so many groups through the years that included everyone—those groups all failed because the group didn't connect. Lots of needy people, and the retired guys wanted so badly to give us advice without ever caring enough to connect with us first.

C: I read extensively prior to this reading group.

1: One. You know I read all the time. It was good to have to read some of this classic stuff.

C: My ministry/congregation benefited from my participation in this group.

1: Three. I would be giving it a “one” if we could have done it long-term. I think it has that kind of potential just not in six months.

C: My life benefited from my participation in this group.

1: Three. Again “one” if it would have been long-term.

Pastor # 2

November 19, 2007

C: Overall, what did you think of our experience? Was it worth your time?

2: I think so. The collegiality was what I appreciated most, and some of the reading was good. I liked that there was substance to our conversation and not just church talk. Sure, we talked football and the usual stuff for the first few minutes, but the balance of the time had depth to it.

C: What value did you gain?

2: The opportunity to delve into spiritual things with colleagues. Of course the comradery was enjoyable, but this was different.

C: "Different?"

2: Even among pastors, it's never easy to stir up a deep conversation. You would think we would be likely to have conversations like this all the time, but no so in my ministry.

C: What was the least valuable aspect?

2: None of it was without value. I guess I'd have to confess that two times I didn't complete the reading; therefore, I missed out on the value there. Even when I didn't do the reading, selfishly I still gained from the discussion. Again, collegiality was the real win in all of this.

C: Would you continue? Why/why not?

2: Yes, it's been great to have that time together.

C: How would you improve on this experience (make it more effective)?

2: Well, I don't know if this would be possible. It really wouldn't be, but we could hire a theologian to come in and speak on a specific subject. Actually, I do that with another group of guys [pastors] already.

C: Really? Tell me about that.

2: For the last three years, I've met with five other guys three times a year to learn and discuss a variety of topics/issues. You ought to look into it. In fact, when you first called me, that's what I thought you might be talking about. Apparently the Lilly Foundation wants to do something about the burnout and loneliness pastors face through their careers. One of my friends heard about a program through Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. The seminary is looking for pastors to help. We got a grant from the Lilly Foundation to pay for our travel and lodging to a variety of U. S. cities to meet with theologians who specialize in our particular areas of interest. We're still doing it today only just once a year; we pay for it ourselves now. You ought to look into it!

C: That sounds incredible. I believe I will look into it for the future.

C: On a scale from 1-6 (1 being "strongly agree"; 6 being "strongly disagree"), rate the following statements:

a) I have a need to meet with ministry colleagues regularly.

2: Two

C: b) I read extensively prior to this reading group.

2: Two

C: My ministry/congregation benefited from my participation in this group.

2: Three.

C: My life benefited from my participation in this group.

2: Two.

C: You have completed your requirements and have been a great help to me personally.

Thank you for being part of this study.

Pastor #3

November 8, 2007

C: Overall, what did you think of our experience? Was it worth your time?

3: It was worthwhile because it forced me to read outside my normal areas of interest.

The stuff we read was deeper, nonpractical. Overall I thought it was great. I appreciated the time away in reading and in travel that encouraged reflection, and I enjoyed the time together with the other guys. This was better than just sitting around shooting the bull, updating each other on our churches. We dealt with substantial theological issues. It was helpful.

C: What value did you gain?

3: I've said all along that study is one aspect of spiritual growth. This was my big chance to tell colleagues about what I've been learning. (This pastor is promoting a system for spiritual growth. He is openly soliciting opportunities to come and speak on this subject).

C: What was the least valuable aspect?

3: I'd have to say it would have been better if we would have had the chance to bond somehow upfront. We kind of got off to a slow start. So, the least valuable aspect of it was that we had no initial group bonding.

C: Would you continue? Why/why not?

3: It would depend on who the leader is. If you were to do something like this again, I would definitely be involved. Otherwise, if someone were to come up with a compelling vision for another group ... and that group would be willing to travel to my hometown 100 miles away, I would continue.

C: How would you improve on this experience (make it more effective)?

3: Like I said already, bonding up front would have made this much better in my opinion—maybe a camping trip or an afternoon of hiking.

C: On a scale from 1-6 (1 being “strongly agree”; 6 being “strongly disagree”), rate the following statements: I have a need to meet with ministry colleagues regularly.

3: Six. Not at all. In fact, I find that I do much better talking with non-clergy (laity).

C: I read extensively prior to this reading group.

3: Six. Not at all. Over the past few years, I’ve pretty much limited my reading to spiritual growth related books.

C: My ministry/congregation benefited from my participation in this group.

3: Three. Sort of, although it is difficult to pinpoint.

C: My life benefited from my participation in this group.

3: Two. I agree, though the benefit has to do with being able to spend time with you and Pastor #4, being here on the old stomping grounds. It was intangibles like this, plus being apart from the usual work day, from the reading and from the other guys, etc.

******What's interesting about this interview is how incredibly needy #3 was when he first came to the area. He was practically begging me to spend time with him, to stir up something like this, to have a regularly scheduled time when we would get together. However, when asked if he has a need to meet with ministry colleagues regularly, he completely dismissed the idea. Perhaps the difference comes in what #1 shared: The need depends on who will be in the group. Most of us in the group had been through similar bad experiences with retired pastors who had nothing better to do than talk all afternoon telling stories of yesteryear, convinced that we were enthralled with their yarns. The bottom line is that those retired pastors enjoyed being with each other just like the younger, still working ones did. The working pastors did not need the retired pastors to sit around and listen to us.

Pastor #4

November 15, 2007

C: Overall, what did you think of our experience? Was it worth your time?

4: Yes, it was worth my time. As pastors, we are so often isolated even though we are slow to see our isolation for what it is. I miss the support I get from other clergy that I cannot get from parishioners in Sunday school classes, etc. I have some dear friends in my congregation, but they do not and cannot understand what it's like being a pastor. That's why the value of the group was so great for me.

C: What value did you gain?

4: "Whenever two or more are gathered together..." the Lord promises to be with us. I don't know. There's something empowering about meeting like we did.

C: What was the least valuable aspect?

4: Since the whole experience was for only six months, it was fine. Had we gone longer, I would have wanted some more broadly based readings.

C: Would you continue? Why/why not?

4: I would continue because there were some real benefits to me and my ministry here in the reading and the fellowship. I don't have to tell you, I'm not doing anything that doesn't benefit my ministry. If anything isn't a plus for my ministry, I'm not doing it. I can't. I don't have time. I work hard all the time, and I have a wife and three children at home who need constant care and attention. If it doesn't pay in terms of ministry, I won't be there.

C: How would you improve on this experience (make it more effective)?

4: Having a specific leader for each book would have made our discussions more inclusive of its themes. A five-point discussion outline would have helped broaden our coverage of each book.

C: On a scale from 1-6 (1 being “strongly agree”; 6 being “strongly disagree”), rate the following statements: I have a need to meet with ministry colleagues regularly.

4: One, depending on who the colleagues are.

C: I read extensively prior to this reading group.

4: Three. I read a lot, but I read differently than we did for this group. I read snippets here and there looking for sermon illustrations. I rarely read from classic writings.

C: My ministry/congregation benefited from my participation in this group.

4: Two.

C: My life benefited from my participation in this group.

4: Two.

Pastor #5

November 13, 2007

C: Overall, what did you think of our experience? Was it worth your time?

5: Some of the books weren't worth the time it took to read them, but the meetings were definitely worth my time. I found that I liked the books that the others didn't seem to like and vice versa.

C: What value did you gain?

5: Our talks were big. The talk wasn't about doing, planning—stuff like that. The issues in the reading instigated broader theological discussions. The reading gave us a starting point other than ourselves, which was healthy and good.

C: What was the least valuable aspect?

5: Some of the books were the least valuable part for me. Finding time to do any of the reading was tough.

C: Would you continue? Why/why not?

5: I would continue. I guess my question is, "Are there other ways to have these conversations—like blogs? Some way to keep us thinking and communicating on that level.

C: How would you improve on this experience (make it more effective)?

5: Blogs would definitely help. With blogs, a deep theological conversation awaits you every time you get online. Whenever you have time, you can contribute your thoughts then walk away. Later when you come back to it, someone else will have done the same thing and responded to you.

C: I was part of an online small group, which was basically a glorified chat room for school credit. In my opinion it failed miserably because the conversation was painstakingly slow—waiting for each person to type their response.

5: It works for me.

C: Okay. Any other improvements?

5: Another improvement would be to somehow ensure that each of the group members would actually read the entire book. A discussion guide would have been helpful before reading the book and/or a desired outcome for the reading. In our discussions, many times the first comment steered the entire meeting. We'd start on an issue raised by the book and move quickly to how that applies in our own contexts. Obviously more time was needed also, but that wasn't possible with our schedules. Every Thursday we met, I was late in getting to my responsibilities for the rest of the day. If spiritual growth were our measurable goal, this exercise would never get us there. If the project was designed to see if the reading group experience would produce spiritual growth, it didn't. Reading books did challenge my thoughts, and I guess I would have to agree that the overall impact may be yet to be seen.

C: On a scale from 1-6 (1 being "strongly agree"; 6 being "strongly disagree"), rate the following statements: I have a need to meet with ministry colleagues regularly.

5: Two.

C: I read extensively prior to this reading group.

5: Three. I don't read books; I read blogs, stuff on the Internet.

C: My ministry/congregation benefited from my participation in this group.

5: Five. I'm not seeing how the congregation or my ministry gained from this experience. Our midweek worship service suffered due to my lesser degree of preparation.

C: My life benefited from my participation in this group.

5: Two. Can I say a few more things?

C: Sure.

5: I enjoyed the people. We don't get together very much and I always enjoy it when we do. It seems to me that online discussions would be so much more convenient, yet on the other hand, I'm realistic enough to know that it would never happen online. I'd get too busy for it and would then simply not respond. Maybe if e-mail alerted me of a new blog whenever it came, that would be enough to keep me engaged, but I doubt it.

Pastor #6

November 11, 2007

What did I think of our experience? Was it worth my time?

I did think it was worth my time. As with just about everything else, I started great guns with great intentions to really delve into the reading and prepare above and beyond for our meetings, then reality hit. I appreciate these other guys being willing to join me in this, after all, it is my doctorate. We made it fun and wished we had more time every time we finished up in a flurry.

What value did I gain?

I gained from the comradery. I looked forward to our meetings each month. I even enjoyed the reading, though I wasn't able to do the reading justice (I like to take lots of notes as I read, so I will have record of its thoughts later—that didn't happen). It was all I could do to complete the reading for each month. A month sounds like a long time to read a book, but I have obviously become reading challenged over the years of my ministry. The discipline is good for me; otherwise, I wouldn't be reading much at all beyond the stuff that comes across my desk.

What was the least valuable aspect?

Knowing in the back of our minds that we were meeting for my degree credit seemed to cast a shadow over us. There was a formality that started us off each time in a place different than where we naturally would go. It was like we felt we should only

make comments that would be acceptable in high-minded circles. Granted, this shadow didn't last long, but it did take us a few minutes to really get into talking each time. Turns out, "big brother" really wasn't watching after all.

Would you continue? Why/why not?

Sure I would do it again, especially without the baggage of a doctoral project hanging around my neck. There is something intrinsically good about pastors getting together to fellowship and discuss some weightier matters of life. I'm assuming the group would be made up of the same pastors. If not, I'd reevaluate.

How would I improve on this experience (make it more effective)?

I wonder what would have happened if instead of all of choosing books we didn't know, if each pastor would have brought a book he had read and thoroughly enjoyed. After we all had read that book, the pastor who brought it to us could then have led a discussion on it. Someone else suggested that we should have started off with some kind of bonding activity (hiking or an overnight retreat). I agree.

The surveys seemed completely unconnected to the rest of the experience and seemed to remind us that this group was ultimately about my degree qualifications. Obviously, a longer term of meeting would have been beneficial. I think we would have seen growth if we had met for years instead of months.

On a scale from 1-6 (1 being "strongly agree"; 6 being "strongly disagree"), rate the following statements:

- a) I have a need to meet with ministry colleagues regularly. 2 (agree). I take for granted being able to spend time with other pastors I know on a regular basis.
- b) I read extensively prior to this reading group. 4 (moderately disagree). Sure, I have read extensively as part of my DMIN and now dissertation studies, but other than that, I have really fallen away from reading on my own. I hope to get back to that discipline in the near future (when my school responsibilities are completed).
- c) My ministry/congregation benefited from my participation in this group. 3 (moderately agree). This question is a tough one. Many priorities were put aside in order to make room in the schedule for the reading and meetings (including travel time). However, the bonds created and sustained with other local pastors are a healthy addition to my priorities and schedule. The gains that I made in my base of knowledge were slight. Few of the concepts I learned grabbed me enough to make me want to preach about it. Of course, this may be a consequence of the depth of matters, not easily preached.
- d) My life benefited from my participation in this group. 3 (moderately agree). I enjoy the friends who make up this group. Any time spent with them is a victory in my life. Everyone is so busy these days. Carving out time for friends is necessary and good for the soul. In the same way, carving out time to read and open myself up to the wisdom and greatness of God is also necessary and good. To the extent I was able to do that, I benefited.

APPENDIX E
MID-TEST PARAGRAPHS

Pastor #1

The last thing I needed was another meeting to attend and prepare for, but I was willing to help out my old friend with his doctorate and knew I'd enjoy the time together once we got going. You know I read constantly, so keeping up with the reading is easy for me. We have covered a couple of theologians I had never read. The ones remaining on the schedule are familiar to me.

I'm enjoying the study. I just wish we had a long retreat week to talk instead of snippets of time in among the chaos of the week, but that will never happen.

Pastor #2

When I agreed to be a part of the discussion group Chris put together I quickly thought I maybe should not have agreed, I realized that my schedule was already a challenge and adding one more thing would only make it more hectic. However, it has been good for me to set aside time to do the readings. I have enjoyed having theological conversations with fellow ministers. In many ways it reminds me of my seminary days which fueled me with mental stimulation. Too often we try to do too much as ministers. We rarely take the time we need to recharge ourselves; I would like to see a group like this continue well after the allotted time we have given.

Pastor #3

I primarily became involved in this group because of an invitation from Chris Pulliam. It didn't really matter what we were going to do, I just came because Chris invited me. What I treasure is the quality of relationships. I saw this as a chance to get to

spend some time with Chris, to meet some new ministry colleagues, and to get reacquainted with some others that I knew previously and hadn't seen in a while, and also to delve into some serious Christian writing that would challenge me. I very much enjoyed reading books and the lively conversation that resulted from them. Study is one of the important ways I keep growing spiritually, so this was definitely a boost to my spiritual life. Because of this group I read books that I might not normally have chosen. The authors challenged my thinking, and then we also had some really lively discussion as a result. I believe one of the reasons that the experience was good because of Chris' leadership. Chris is such an enjoyable and encouraging person to be around that it made the overall experience something to look forward to. I'm glad to have been included in the project.

Pastor #4

Ministry can be a lonely, isolated place. As church pastors much of our time is either spent putting out fires, attending necessary meetings or locked up in a room trying to discern the Word of God. Therefore time spent with ministerial colleagues and friends is usually a great blessing and this has been just that. Hearing other perspectives on particular topics and issues can be both spiritually challenging and affirming—two things I think we need to keep our ministry fresh and two things we don't always get from our parishioners.

Making time to do things outside of the weekly calendar can be difficult. However, the time spent both reading and discussing has proven to be valuable (as I assumed it would be). It is so easy to simply go about our daily schedule, yet I would

imagine all involved would say isolating ourselves from our colleagues only narrows the breadth of our potential to be effective leaders for Christ.

Pastor #5

This experience has been pretty good. Another meeting is not what my schedule needs and my reading is rushed (I'm keeping up so far, almost). I hope our discussion can go deeper in the months we have left. We just get rolling and it's time to go. Everyone seems preoccupied once the clock hits 1:15PM (myself included), on to the next thing! We need to spend more time on what the books are saying before we go off on our own soapboxes (no names!). My turn to lead comes up next meeting.

Pastor #6

Whatever excuse we need to get together works for me. Last week, I was stressing over the reading—no time! When I arrived, I had read more than enough to participate in the discussion. “So, is a pastor’s life really that different?”

I can’t say I’ve grown spiritually because of this experience directly, but I’ve enjoyed the fellowship, the Razorback rumor-mill, and the updates on our churches. What’s lacking most in my life isn’t merely deep theological discussion but time with others who understand ministry and who will walk my journey with me. The theological discussions will come within those relationships.

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